ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND THE DEBATE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN ISLAM

By
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Supervisor
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This Thesis was Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master's Degree of Women's Studies

Faculty of Graduate Studies
University of Jordan

May, 2011

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Islamic Feminism and the Debate of Gender
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....

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Islamic Feminism and the Debate of Gender Equality in Islam

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This Thesis/Dissertation (Islamic Feminism and the Debate of Gender Equality in Islam) was Successfully Defended and Approved on ----24/ April/ 2011---

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DEDICATION

To My Mother; The Muslim, The Feminist

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the supervisor of this research Prof. Mohammad Majali for his keen support and guidance. As well as, the Defense Committee for their objectivity and enlightened insights.

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ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND THE DEBATE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN ISLAM

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to prove that Islam has not oppressed women, however, certain patriarchal readings of Islam, and other historical factors has contributed to the subordination and marginalization of women. Through this study a qualitative method has been followed by conducting an analytical and descriptive research. In conclusion the researcher saw that there is a feminist potential in Islam and Islamic teachings that can benefit the general cause of women's rights by producing a hybrid form of feminist activism that employs aspects of Islam and Islamic feminism, in addition to some principle of liberal and global feminisms.

Introduction:

Nowadays; whenever the issue of women rights is discussed Islam is caught in the middle, a lot of researchers claim it to be an obstacle in the way of giving women their rights and promote secularism as the answer to the problem, others justify the injustice they practice against women with Islamic teachings and patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith. Accordingly, this controversy has led to the establishment of a new feminist discourse in the Middle East known as Islamic Feminism that operates within two dimensions: the first is to reread and reinterpret certain verses of the Qur'an and Hadith and the second is to create a culturally authentic discourse of women rights in the Middle East that represents and understands the struggle of the everyday woman in this particular area of the world in a better way by referring to Islam and incorporating Islamic teachings in their feminist rhetoric.

The first scope of Islamic feminism will be discussed briefly through this research. Since; engaging in a critical theological debate that discusses the authenticity of certain traditions of the prophet or challenges mainstream Qur'an exegeses requires an accumulative theological knowledge and education that I do not possess. Meanwhile, the cultural aspect of Islamic feminism will be discussed thoroughly, because feminism is treated here as a socio-cultural phenomenon that dealt with Islam as a socio-religious constituent of Middle Eastern culture.

This research aims to explore the multiple factors that instituted the polarized relationship between Islam and feminism. However, making certain clarifications regarding the use of some terminologies present in the body of the research is crucial for a better understanding of the context. By the West or Western Feminism, I do not

mean that neither one of them is a monolith; however, it is an extension of the West definition of the East as non-western, which presents the West as an antonym of the East.

Moreover, by presenting Islamic feminism as culturally authentic, I do not encourage its isolation from global feminism, or its absolute deviation from its concept. Yet, I try to point out the positive influence it might have within and without Islamic society by detecting the feminist potential in Islam and utilizing it to benefit the quest of women's rights.

Finally, by referring repeatedly to the "Muslim Woman" and her image, I do not intend to present a uniformed presentation of her or her image, as I am aware of the diversity of "Muslim women" who live in our modern Islamic societies. However; I am trying to uncover the systematic process of stereotyping that shapes and reshapes the Image of the "Muslim Woman" from within and without.

Problem Statement:

Can we blame Islam for oppressing Muslims or should we blame Muslims for misunderstanding Islam? (See Barlas, 2002) Is women oppression a result of Islamic teaching or is it generated from the disability of Muslims to differentiate the Islamic from the traditional?

Importance of the Study:

Islam is widely viewed by western cultures as a factor of oppression for Muslim and Arab women. This is due to the fact that westerners do not understand the

teachings of Islam clearly but also because Muslims themselves fail to understand and practice the true essence of Islam when it comes to women. The goal of this research is not to present women's rights in Islam in an abstract narrative way but to conduct a comprehensive study that will analyze the teachings and traditions of Islam regarding women from different angels using a gender sensitive approach in order to come out with a cohesive framework of Women rights that is both modern and compatible with Islam.

Objective of the study:

This study aims to prove that Islam has not oppressed women, however, certain patriarchal readings of Islam and other historical factors has contributed to the subordination and marginalization of women. In order to eliminate the injustice inflected on women it is very important to understand Islam in a better way and that would be done by reclaiming Muslim women cultural heritage and authenticity. It is also important to highlight how Western feminist rhetoric has been employed to assert the cultural and intellectual inferiority of Muslim women and consequently prove the cultural and intellectual inferiority of Islam.

Methodology of Research:

This study is an analytical and descriptive research. The researcher will be using a qualitative method. Throughout the study, the researcher will be depending on the Qur'an in both Arabic and the translation of its words in English, as well as, to different books of Islamic thought. The researcher will be analyzing literature, books,

articles and different kinds of resources related to feminism, Islam, Islamic feminism, and women rights in Islam. For verses of the Qur'an in English language the researcher have referred to " Interpretation of the Meaning of the Nobel Qur'an in the English Language" by Muhammad Al-Hilali and Muhammad Khan. Meanwhile, for Hadith authentication the source of the Hadith is mentioned between brackets followed by the sequence number of the Hadith in the source itself. Through the research the researcher have referred to official internet websites that end with .org, .edu, or .gov, however, some a credible official websites that end with .com or .net were referred to as well.

Literature Review:

1. **Barazangi, Nemat Hafez (2009), The Absence of Muslim Women in Shaping Islamic Thought: Foundations of Muslims' Peaceful and Just Co-Existence**: This study debates how has the absence of Muslim women in shaping Islamic thought contributed to the prevailing injustices and extremism that affect women in the Muslim world. It also studies how other factors such as colonial and post-colonial historical and political dynamics are responsible for women's situation in Muslim countries. Furthermore it question how justifiable are the European and American governments interventions under the claim of liberating and civilizing Muslim women. Finally, it concludes that the use and misuse of the Hadith (Prophet Mohammad traditions) and the belief carried out by most Muslims that the rules of male exegesis and jurists are absolute and binding has created a different and an equal level of religious participation for Muslim women compared to men's. In order to overcome these obstacles the writer suggests

letting Muslim women speak and think for themselves and to connect the historical with the contemporary and understand the historical context for the issues of public and religious policies.

2. **Foley, Rebecca (2004), Muslim Women's Challenges to Islamic Law:** This study explores Muslim women agency within an Islamic framework and the relationship it has with women's rights in Islam by focusing on Malaysian Muslim women experience and activism. It debates the pre-conceived notion about feminism being universal and cross-cultural arguing that the culturally authentic approach used by Malaysian women has proven to be more politically strategic and contributed to the establishment of their rights depending on an Islamic framework that was accepted by members of their society for being culturally appropriate. It also points out that Malaysian Muslim women activism based on their religion refutes the feminist theory that claims religion to be a merely private matter or outside of a feminist framework, as in the case of Muslim women religion is part of their cultural identity. The study concluded that a rethinking of Islamic interpretation and practice along with women employing their own agency to think and reinterpret Islam, in addition to having a culturally authentic framework of women rights that is based on Islam, will help women in Muslim countries create a feminist discourse that will be accepted and sponsored by their society.

3. **Sonbol, Amira El- Azhary (2003), Women of Jordan: Islam, Labor and the Law:** In this extended study about Jordanian women; women labor rights in Islam are discussed. The writer analyzes certain aspects that affect women labor in

Jordan which are attributed to Islam such as laws of guardianship, marriage and husband obedience using a contextual historical approach. The writer did draw up a cohesive framework of women's rights in Islam while focusing on women's labor, political, and marital rights by giving vivid examples of women contribution to foundation Islam and to early Islamic states. The study concluded that it is not Islam that hinders women progress, however, the misunderstanding of certain Islamic laws, in addition to some patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an, the use and misuse of the Hadith and the one dimensional presentation of women role in Islamic history are the factors responsible for the injustice and obstacles faced by Jordanian women.

4. **Weber, Charlott(2001), Unveiling Schehrezad: Feminist Orientalism in the International Alliance of Women, 1911-1950:** In this historical study Weber tracks the first feminist writings on Middle Eastern women in the West. She contextualize these writings to point out the interchangeably relationship between orientalism, colonialism, and feminism. In addition, she explains how the study of these early feminist writings is essential to understand both Middle Eastern feminist scholarship, Western scholarship on Middle Eastern women, and their positions regarding Islam.

What distinguishes this study?

In this study the researcher will analyze and debate the issue of women rights in the Qur'an and Hadith by connecting all the dots between history, sociology and religion highlighting how did historical and socio-economic factors contribute to Muslim women absence from theological debates. It will also point out how this absence has

created a patriarchal foundation for Islamic institutions and legitimized certain biased practices against women.

Chapter I

Islam and Gender

This chapter represents a brief introduction to Islamic traditions and legal verdicts in regard of women. Such an introduction is a cornerstone in our argument that is based on the fact that Islam is a religion of justice and equality. Islam granted Women full citizenship rights since they were recognized as a legitimate source of religious , legal and scientific knowledge. Thus Islam can also be a source of a feminist discourse.

I.I. An Overview: A Historical Contextual Reading of Women Rights before and after Islam

For many people the words Islam and Gender might seem irrelevant. Since Islam has been portrayed by some Muslims and non-Muslims as a patriarchal[1] religion which suppresses and subordinates women. Thus, they presume that the teachings of Islam either supported or approved the prevailing patriarchal practices of Jahilyah.

This notion cannot be lees true, as Islam has provided women with an unprecedented status and dignity at the time. This fact was recognized not only by Muslims themselves but also by others "According to a popular writer on Islam, Karen Armstrong, the women of Muhammad's day " did not seem to have experienced Islam as an oppressive religion, though later, as happened in Christianity men would hijack the faith and bring it in line with the prevailing patriarchy"" (Spencer, 2002, P.73)

[1] Patriarchy is: social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or the family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line; broadly: control by men of a disproportionately large share of power. (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary)

However, In order to understand how gender friendly Islamic doctrines are, we need to conduct a process of comparison and contrast between women conditions in Islamic and pre-Islamic times.

Before Islam, women in the Arab peninsula were denied their basic rights, the tradition of "Female Infanticide" which means burying a female born alive was widely spread. " One of the social reasons for such an attitude was that in pre-Islamic times, there were often inter-tribal blood feuds, which demanded male members to defend their tribes. Hence men were in much greater demand than women. In addition in the tribal conflicts, the enemy always aimed at capturing women and taking them as prisoners so that they could collect heavy ransoms. Failing to do so, they would keep them as slaves" (Jawad,1998,P.2). Islam put an end to this practice, as the Qur'an stated:

"And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonor or bury her in the earth ?Certainly, evil is their decision."

(Qur'an 16:58-59)

"And when the female (infant) buried alive (as the pagan Arabs used to do) shall be questioned. For what sin she was killed?"

(Qur'an 81:8-9)

In addition to denying them their basic human and divine rights, the pre-Islamic society treated women as sexual objects, this can be seen clearly in the nature of the various forms of marriage that were practiced during pre-Islamic times.

The predominant form of marriage in pre-Islam[2] can be described as contractual and not sacramental. The first type of marriage was called "Zawaj al-bau'lah" which is the only form of marriage that continued in Islam with additional conditions and was later known as "Nikah", the elements of this marriage can be summed up with the following: Proposing and accepting, as well as dower money that was often given to the family of the bride and not the bride herself. However, Islam bettered the conditions of this marriage remarkably in favor of women which will be discussed in details later on.

The second form of marriage was known as "Nikah al-Dayzen" in this kind of marriage the eldest son of the man is entitled to inherit his wife. If he desires to marry her he throws a piece of cloth over her, otherwise he could marry her off to one of his brothers after receiving a fresh dower or prevent her from marrying anyone else. Nevertheless, the woman can free herself by paying him an agreeable amount of money.

The third form of marriage is still known until today as "Mut'ah Marriage" which can be described as "A temporary marriage in which the period of its validity is specified, after this period is over the marriage is dissolved. According to the Sunni Muslims the prophet has prohibited this form of marriage after having allowed it during wartimes and battles. However, the twelve Shi'as believe that the Mut'ah marriage was never prohibited by the prophet" (Engineer,1992, P.24), and thereof they continue to practice it until now.

The fourth form of marriage was known as "Zawaj al-Badal" in this type of marriage two men would mutually exchange their wives without paying any fresh dower to either one of the them.

[2] For forms of marriage before Islam: See (Sabeq,1987, P.8-9) and (Engineer, 1996, P.23-27)

The fifth form of marriage is "Zawag al-Shighar" in this kind of marriage no dower was paid, because a man would marry his daughter or sister to another man who would marry his daughter or sister in return.

The sixth form of marriage can be described as the most controversial. "In this marriage the husband would as his wife to have sexual intercourse with another man in order to get pregnant. He would refrain from going near her until she conceives from that person. Generally, people used to send their wives to men known for their bravery, generosity, etc. It must be said that this form of marriage was extremely rare among Arabs. Usually only when a man was impotent would he report to it. Some people maintain that this form of marriage was practiced in respect of slave girl." (See Engineer, 1992, P.24), also see (Sabeq, 1987, P2, P.8).

The last form of marriage is "Nikah al-Za'inah" this type of marriage was practiced when women were captured as hostages during wartimes. If the capturer wished to marry his hostage she could not refuse his proposal despite the fact that no dower was offered to her.

Meanwhile, when Islam came it institutionalized and organized the marital bond, which mainly came in favor of women. "Marriage in Islam requires a contract between two equal partners. Hence, in Islamic terms, the women is to be a subject rather than an object in the marriage contract" (Jawad,1998, P.35). Islam requires the proposal and acceptance of both parties (man and woman) for the validity of the marriage contract, and give the Muslim woman the right and freedom to choose her future husband, to look at him and get to know him. Islam warned against coercing women to marry someone they did not like or desire, a woman's consent is a crucial element that determines the validity of the marriage contract as highlighted above.

Moreover, Islam requires the presence of two witnesses (two men or one man and two women) in order for this marriage to be public. Islam also demanded that both the bride and groom should be of proper marriageable age (i.e. adults and sane), it did not prohibit or encourage age discrepancy between the married couple leaving it to their own judgment and preferences (Sabeq, 1987). Likewise, it required "a degree of compatibility between the two partners in terms of social status, educational standards and physical attraction" (Jawad, 1998,P.32). Nevertheless, such terms are not obligatory.

When a couple is married, each party is entitled to maintain certain rights[3]. Islam stipulated that a man should present his prospective wife with a gift which is known as "dower" (one initial and another deferred). Islam advised this dower to be reasonable neither too high nor too low which is handed entirely to the woman herself and not to male family members. Islam also allowed the dower to carry a material (gold, money, cattle, etc.) or moral value (teaching the bride the Qur'an or religious matters, etc.).

Another financial right a woman enjoy when she is married is spousal alimony which includes a living allowance, housing, clothing and any other needs. This allowance is given to the wife in return of her marital commitment.

Furthermore, Islam has stipulated more procedural and moral rights for married women, such as good and dignified treatment, confidentiality of marital discussions, secrets and sexual activities, respect, and an autonomous economic agency to run and manage her personal property and assets without the husband's interference.

[3] See Sabeq(1987) ,Engineer(1996) ,and Jawad(1996)

For Islam preserving men and women from falling into sin through marriage is very important. Thus, any form of marriage that would force a woman to commit adultery or that does not guarantee an exclusive sexual intercourse between a man and a woman when married are deemed illegal for Muslims.

In the case of divorce, men in pre-Islamic times used to divorce their women arbitrary without any reason, a man could take his wife back during her waiting period regardless of the number of times a divorce took place reaching in some cases more than 100 times, In addition divorce was used as a tool to blackmail and humiliate women. (Sabeq,1987, P.220)

In Islam divorce is permissible but not encouraged . Islam instated a gradual divorce process, that starts with revocable divorce that allows a man to take his wife back during her waiting period without a new dower or a marriage contract. If a man divorced a woman for a second time or if he did not take her back during her waiting period the revocable divorce becomes irrevocable and the man cannot take her back unless a new marriage contract and a new dower were present. If a man divorces his wife for a third time this divorce is considered to be final and irrevocable under any terms, unless the woman marries another man and then gets a divorce or be widowed. (See Sabeq, 1987, P2, P.243-51)

A divorced woman has the right to cash her deferred dower and to receive alimony from her husband during her waiting period. Islam also allowed widowed and divorced women to remarry and did not see marital dissolution as a source of shame or humiliation.

In addition, Islam has empowered women economically through various sources. The first and most important was inheritance, as women were entitled to

inherit a specified share of their parents, husband's, siblings money and property that varied according to their degree of kinship to the deceased.

Islam also gave women the right to engage in honorable professions and encouraged their education. Under the reign of Islam women enjoyed high status and absolute agency.

I.II Evidence of Gender Equality from the Qur'an and the Hadith

The Qur'an states clearly and repeatedly that men and women share the same human spiritual nature:

" O mankind! Be dutiful to your Lord, Who created you from a single person (Adam), and from him (Adam) He created his wife [Hawwa (Eve)], and from them both He created many men and women and fear Allah through Whom you demand your mutual (rights), and (do not cut the relations of) the wombs (kinship) . Surely, Allah is Ever an All-Watcher over you." **(Qur'an 4:1)**

(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves and pairs among cattle: by this means does He multiply you: there is nothing whatever like unto Him and Her is the One that hears and sees (all things.) **(Qur'an42:11))**

Bother genders were recipients of the "divine breath" and were created from the same human and spiritual nature:

***But He fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him something of His spirit. And He gave you (the faculties of) hearing and sight and feeling (and understanding):little thanks to you give* (Qur'an 15:29)**

Qur'an also manifests that both Adam and Eve are equally responsible for man's fall from heaven. "Rather, both were tempted by satan and sinned in the pursuit of power and eternal life. Furthermore, god forgave humanity after the fall. There is no continuing burden from the sin" (Al-Hibri, 2005, P.164)[4]

***"So he misled them with deception. Then when they tasted of the tree, that which was hidden from them of their shame (private parts) became manifest to them and they began to stick together the leaves of Paradise over themselves (in order to cover their shame). And their Lord called out to them (saying): "Did I not forbid you that tree and tell you: Verily, Shaitan (Satan) is an open enemy unto you?, They said: "Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If You forgive us not, and bestow not upon us Your Mercy, we shall certainly be of the losers., (Allah) said: "Get down, one of you an enemy to the other [i.e. Adam, Hawwa (Eve), and Shaitan (Satan), etc.]. On earth will be a dwelling-place for you and an enjoyment, - for a time."* (Qur'an 7:22-24)**

Both men and women are vicegerents of Allah on earth, they are both responsible for the prosperity and advancement of the Human Race, i.e. equal citizens with similar citizenship requirements.

"And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels: "Verily, I am going to place (mankind) generations after generations on earth." They said: "Will You place therein those who will make mischief therein and shed blood, - while we glorify You

[4] See: Afzal-Khan (2005)

with praises and thanks (Exalted be You above all that they associate with You as partners) and sanctify You." He (Allah) said: "I know that which you do not know."**(Qur'an 2:30)**

"And indeed We have honored the Children of Adam, and We have carried them on land and sea, and have provided them with At-Taiyibat (lawful good things), and have preferred them above many of those whom We have created with a marked preference". **(Qur'an 17:70)**

Men and women are equally held responsible for their actions, no man or woman is better than the other, in the eyes of Allah the all mighty we are all the same regardless of gender, race, political or social status.

"On the Day you shall see the believing men and the believing women their light running forward before them and by their right hands. Glad tidings for you this Day! Gardens under which rivers flow (Paradise), to dwell therein forever! Truly, this is the great success!" **(Qur'an 57:12)**

So their Lord accepted of them (their supplication and answered them), "Never will I allow to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female. You are (members) one of another, so those who emigrated and were driven out from their homes, and suffered harm in My Cause, and who fought, and were killed (in My Cause), verily, I will remit from them their evil deeds and admit them into Gardens under which rivers flow (in Paradise); a reward from Allah, and with Allah is the best of rewards."**(Qur'an 3:195)**

" Verily, the Muslims (those who submit to Allah in Islam) men and women, the believers men and women (who believe in Islamic Monotheism), the men and the

women who are obedient (to Allah), the men and women who are truthful (in their speech and deeds), the men and the women who are patient (in performing all the duties which Allah has ordered and in abstaining from all that Allah has forbidden), the men and the women who are humble (before their Lord Allah), the men and the women who give Sadaqat (i.e. Zakat, and alms, etc.), the men and the women who observe Saum (fast) (the obligatory fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the optional Nawafil fasting), the men and the women who guard their chastity (from illegal sexual acts) and the men and the women who remember Allah much with their hearts and tongues (while sitting, standing, lying, etc. for more than 300 times extra over the remembrance of Allah during the five compulsory congregational prayers) or praying extra additional Nawafil prayers of night in the last part of night, etc.) Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward (i.e. Paradise)." **(Qur'an 33:35)**

"And whoever does righteous good deeds, male or female, and is a true believer in the Oneness of Allah (Muslim), such will enter Paradise and not the least injustice, even to the size of a Naqira (speck on the back of a date-stone), will be done to them." **(Qur'an 4:124)**

Prophet Mohammad also promoted the same values that were stipulated in the Qur'an whether in his tradition or in his words, he was actually considered to be a champion of women and their rights.

"Assuredly, women are the twin halves of men." (Abu-Dawud(236), and Turmuthi(113))

The prophet used to help his wives in household chores which shows how Islam did not reinforce the traditional gender roles:

It is narrated that Aisha, Prophet Muhammad's wife, said, "Prophet Muhammad used to stitch his clothes, milk the goats and help in the chores inside the house." (Ahmed, 24382)

Prophet Mohammad constantly reminded Muslim men to be kind to their wives, and urged them not to use violence against them.

"The best of you are they who behave best to their wives."(Ibn Majah,1977)

Prophet Mohammad advised parents to be fair and just to their children and to treat girls in a good and dignified manner, it was reported that he said:

"Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, Allah will enter him into Paradise." (Abu Dawud, 5146)

"Whosoever supports two or three daughters, or two or three sisters, until his death or theirs, he and I will come in the day of judgment as this (and he pointed with his two fingers held together)." (Ahmad,12089)

Moreover, during his farewell pilgrimage sermon Prophet Mohammad peace be upon him, instructed Muslims to be kind to their wives, while explaining the complementary nature of Marriage in Islam:

"Fear God regarding women. Verily you have married them with the trust of God, and made their bodies lawful with the word of God. You have got (rights) over them, and they have got (rights) over you in respect of their food and clothing according to your means."(Ibn Hisham, P.251)

Prophet Mohammad peace be upon him was a vivid example of kindness, fairness and justice to women, he never hurt a woman, slave or child. Thus, Muslim should take after his example in their dealings with women.

I.III. Women in Islamic History[5]

Muslim men and women contributed to building the early Islamic state in Medina, both of them sacrificed their lives and money for the cause of Islam as well. In this section we will highlight the stories and contributions of some Muslim women. Some of them are of the prophet's wives and mothers of believers, while others are companions and successors.

Khadija bint Khawaylid

Her name is Khadija bint Khawaylid bin Asad, the daughter of a very prominent leader and businessman from the tribe of Quraish. She married twice before marrying Prophet Mohammad bin Abdullah. She was known for her poise and integrity among her tribesmen, and was a very successful merchant and business owner.

Khadija bint Khawaylid was the first person (man or woman) to enter Islam and believe in Allah and his prophet Mohammad. She was the first lady to be greeted by Allah through his angel Gabriel. Khadija provided the prophet with tremendous financial and moral support in the early days of Islam, Aisha bint abu Bakr reported on him saying about Khadija: ***" I have not yet found a better wife than her. She had faith in me when everyone, even members of my own family and tribe did not believe in me, and accepted that I was truly a Prophet and a messenger of Allah. She converted to Islam, spent all her wealth and worldly goods to help me spread this faith and this too at a time when the entire world seemed to have turned against me and persecuted me. And it is through her that Allah blessed me with children".*** (Ahmed, 24343)

[5] See: Zerikili (1984), Ghadanfar(2001), Sonbol (2003)

The story of Prophet Mohammad and Khadija is an embodiment of the ideal relationship between a man and a woman. This relationship is complementary, we can see that Khadija and the Prophet supported each other in times of need. The prophet remained grateful to his wife even after her death, and always remembered her good traits and tremendous contribution to Islam.

Aisha bint Abu Bakr

Aisha bint Abu Bakr is another mother of the believers, and the daughter of Abu Bakr one of the prophets closest companions. She was known for her clever mind and sharp memory "she hardly ever forgot something once she heard it" (Ghadanfar,2001, P.45). This made Aisha one of the few companions to whom thousands of traditions "***Ahadith***", particularly 2210 are attributed to.

Her sharp mind and religious knowledge made her one of the most prominent theologians at the time. The prophet's companions used to consult with her as "Aisha was an expert on interpretation and commentary due to her close association with the Prophet Muhammad. Much of the Book of ***Tafsir*** in ***Sahih*** Muslim contains narrations from her." (Ghadanfar, 2001,P.14)

Um Salamah bint Abu Umayyah

Um Salamah is another mother of the believers, who was famous for her courage and outstanding personality. Umm Salamah also reported 378 of the prophet's traditions "***Ahadith***". Her verdicts in religious and legal matters were recognized among other fellow male companions such as Anas bin Malik and Abu Hurairah.

Um Salamah's wisdom and cleverness was best articulated in the truce of Hudaibiah, "The Prophet ordered his companions to sacrifice animals they brought along for the purpose, and shave their heads, but they all seemed reluctant and did not rise to obey his command. When Um Salamah saw the situation she suggested that he

should not speak about the subject to anyone, but just go out from the tent and offer the sacrifice and shave his head. Then he could see the effect of his action. And what she expected happened- all the companions followed" (Ghadanfar,2001, P.88).

Highlights of Women Historic Contribution to Islam

The common notion among some Muslims and non-Muslims equally that Muslim women were imprisoned inside their maternal and marital role by Islam is not true. These allegations can be refuted by giving vivid examples of women in Islamic history who enjoyed leading roles in their society.

Umm Ammarah and her courageous stance in the battle of Uhud, were recorded by historians. When people scattered and Muslims were in the weaker side, Umm Ammarah stood side by side with men and shielded the prophet with her body, fought off the enemies with her sword, and lost an arm in the battle.

Safiyyah bint Abd al-Motaleb protected Muslim women during the battle of Ahzab from a Jewish intruder that was roaming around their fortress and killed him. Other women companions presented honorable sacrifices such as Asma' bint Bakr, Umm Abban, Umm Hakeem, and Umm Haram who participated in the attack on Cyprus.

Women also presented logistic support to Muslim men during times of war, as they used to nurse the wounded, provided food and other supplies to the army and secured the supply chain.

In addition, Women played an important role in politics. 'Caliph Umar bin al-Khatab so valued Shifa' bint Abdullah for her political intelligence and insight that he very often consulted with her. He often gave her the responsibility of running the

affairs of state relating to trade and commerce" (Ghadanfar,2001, P.14). Another example is Zubaida bint Ja'far bin al Mansour the wife of Haroun Arrashid who built "Zubaida's Spring" in mecca equipped with water channels that connected the spring with water sources in Anno'man valley. She devoted her life and fortune to build rest stops between Baghdad and Mecca and provided them with service utilities. Al-Ador Al- Karima the Mother of Mujahid one of the Sultan's of Yemen is another great example, she ruled the country in the 13th century when her son was capture and tribal war was raging in it, she helped maintaining peace and stability until his return. She built several schools and mosques in various parts of Yemen.

Likewise, Women engaged in medical professions in times of peace, they were midwives, nurses, sergeant and veterinarians. Al- Khansa the famous Islamic female figure was a vet that people travelled to meet and asked for her medical advice for their sheep and camels. Rufaida Asulamiah's was a sergeant and her tent was equipped with the necessary instruments to operate at that time. In the 19 century Jalila Tamrhan the daughter of Saleh Ali Bik, an Egyptian midwife and a teacher at the nursing school that Mohammad Ali opened in Cairo, wrote a book about the arts of midwifery.

Muslim women excelled in the fields of arts and poetry as well, Al-Khansa poetry is still memorized and recited until our days. Other women were known for speech writing and having good oratory skills such as Asma' bint Yazid bin Saken. In Andalusia, during the 13th century Hamda bint Ziad and her sister Zainab were famous poets and writers, who studied poetry and arts with men. Yet, were known for their pious, chastity and good manners. Aisha al-Baou'niah (called after Baou'n village in Ajloun) was a famous writer and poet of the 16th century who possessed

great linguistic talent and knowledge, she wrote several books of poetry, arts, and religion.

Many Muslim women were famous for their religious knowledge and scholarship through Islamic history, Aisha bint Muhammad a scholar who lived in Damascus during the 14th century was famous for her knowledge of the Prophet's tradition, and was the master of the science of tradition in her time, the Safadi said in her account: "She was the most a credible among her fellow scholars"[6].

Set al-Wozara' bint Omar, is also a scholar who lived in the 14th century and was famous for her knowledge of ***Fiqh*** jurisprudence rulings and oratory skills. Another scholar of the 14th century was Set al-Arab who was famous for her knowledge of the prophet's traditions and their reporters, Al-Hafez Al-Jazri was one of her students[7].

These women represent a few examples of the kind of empowerment and participation Muslim women had in public life. Other women were also mentioned in books of Islamic history as queens, scholars, worriers, poets, and artists.

I.IV. Islam and Gender

Before we discuss the relationship between Islam and Gender, I need to define Gender:

"Gender refers to the social differences and relations between men and women which are learned, vary widely among societies and cultures, and change over time. The term gender does not replace the term sex, which refers exclusively to biological

[6] See: Zerkili(1984), P3, P.241
[7] See: Zerkili(1987),P3, P.77.

differences between men and women. For example, statistical data are broken down by sex. The term gender is used to analyse the roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of women and men in all areas and in any given social context. Gender roles are learned behaviours in a given society, community or other social group. They condition that activities, tasks and responsibilities are perceived as male or female. Gender roles are affected by age, class, race, ethnicity and religion, and by the geographical, economic and political environment." (UNESCO, 2000)[8]

Thus, we understand that Gender is a kind of policy that targets both males and females, in order to achieve social and political justice. This concept is not far from the teachings of Islam. Since, Islam takes the interests of both men and women into consideration.

Gender Issues is a term that pertains to Islamic teaching a well and it refers "to a set of controversial themes involving status determinants made on basis of gender, sex differentiations, or inequality. This include women's roles and status, and their self-definitions. Gender issues cannot be termed "women's issues", because they involve cross-sex interaction as well as male attitudes and actions, and affects society as a whole" (Zuhur, 1992, P.6).

Islam actually incorporate cross-sex interaction, as both men and women are members of the Ummah and vicegerents of Allah on earth. Their role is rather complementary than rivalry, and although Islam did promote certain gender roles for men and women through its teachings; it did not limit them to these specific roles, which grants both men and women more flexibility in terms of adapting to the variable conditions of life.

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[8] See: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121145e.pdf

Muslim women history proved that they were not secluded nor excluded from the public scene in the past. Many of them enjoyed high social, academic, and even political status. Therefore, one cannot help but to question what happened to these privileges that Muslim women once enjoyed and benefited from.

According to Sonbol (2003) the establishment of the Ottoman empire is the reason behind the sexual hierarchy that prevails in Islamic societies: " the Ottoman empire depended on bureaucracies to ensure their hold over over their province standardization became a requirement, and the legal system as a whole, including the religious hierarchy, became more state controlled and streamlined to suit state needs" (P.64).

Then Islamic states were the ones patriarchal not Islam, rules and procedures that were outlined by modern states are the ones who generated a state of gender inequality in Islamic society. When state "standardization" started listing being a male as a requirement for participating in the public life, year after year a "Urf"[9] was formed a social code by which women absence from public life became the norm, and their presence the exception.

However, it is not right for Muslims or non-Muslim to attribute this state of gender disparity to Islam. Since, Islam doesn't "privilege men over women in their biological capacity as males, or treat man as the self (normative) and woman as the Other, or view women and men as binary opposites, as modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation and inequality do" (Barlas, 2002, P.1)

Yet, such norms and values are hard to change since women themselves became an important element of the production and reproduction of this social, legal and moral code. The question here is: can we utilize Islam to dismantle such norms

[9] Customary Practices

that are being advertised as Islamic, but are actually traditional? Can we recognize the feminist potential that lies in Islam? And how can we integrate Islamic discourse into mainstream feminist discourse?

Questions that require a deeper understanding for the essence and spirit of Islam, that promotes women rights in a rational context rather than an emotional one. When Islam started reforming the nomadic Arab society, it did that gradually. It started changing the Normative by breaking it up one piece at a time. If Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) used a radical discourse that disfranchised the entire social, political, and moral code of pre-Islamic societies, his calling to Islam would not be referred to by many scholars as a successful socio-religious revolution. As "no revolution, political or religious (and Islam was indeed a socio-religious revolution) can remove all traces of the past. Continuity is always there and it is this continuity which maintains an organic relationship with the past. The total breaking of ties with the past, even if attempted, cannot succeed" (Engineer, 1996,P.20)

In this context it is important to highlight that Gender equality in Islam is not absolute, consequently it does not follow a 50/50 structure of rights and duties. In order to explain how I see the embodiment of Gender Equality in Islam I will refer to the following definitions that are pivotal for this debate:

Gender equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from, economic, social, cultural and political development. Gender equality is therefore the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in their

home, their community and their society. Gender equality starts with equal valuing of girls and boys. (UNESCO,2000)[10]

Meanwhile, **Gender equity** means fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities. In the development context, a gender equity goal often requires built-in measures to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages of women. (IFAD http://www.ifad.org/gender/glossary.htm)[11]

Both of these terms are used in scholarly work interchangeably. However, one of them represents the female-male dynamics in Islam, which is gender equity. Islam gives women and men "equal treatment or treatment that is different but equivalent". It also has "built-in measures to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages of women", i.e. marital, economic, social, and political rights that they did not possess before Islam. The implementation of these built-in measures would provide equivalent rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.

Moreover, these built-in measures that aimed to reform the pre-Islamic society and dismantle the normative practices and beliefs of women inferiority and subordination, can be reutilized by us to reform patriarchal Islamic societies that deviated from the Islamic system in favor of the modern state formation.

Muslim women reached an advanced state of political, economic, and social empowerment because of the implementation of these "built-in measures", i.e. Islamic teachings, that allowed their male counterparts to accept them as their "equivalents" and as their partners.

[10] See: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121145e.pdf
[11] See: http://www.fao-ilo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/fao_ilo/pdf/FAQs/Definitions__2_.pdf

After implementing the Islamic teachings of gender equity and women rights , without manipulation and double standards, for a respective period of time, women visibility in public life will return back to being the norm, while their seclusion will become the exception. A balanced strategy for gender equity such as the one provided by Islam would generate a state of Gender equality if all the variable factors from within and without were isolated. However, this is a Utopian state that humanity did not reach until our day.

Chapter Two

Feminism in the Middle East

In this chapter I will discuss the history of feminism in the international and national context. However, I will not track its evolution and development in all Middle Eastern countries, instead I have decided to give a brief account of the history of feminism in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, with major emphasis on Egypt as the pioneering country in the Arab region in feminist activism and because of the rich body of scholarship that studied, discussed and analyzed the women's movement in it.

II.I An Introduction to Feminism

History of Feminism

Organized feminism first emerged in 1850s and 1860s in what is now referred to as first wave feminism. Feminism at that time did not represent a single movement with consolidated goals and agendas, but was a group of movements that "attacked men monopoly of education, professional careers, and culture; married women's economic and legal dependence; sexual and moral double standards; women's lack of control over their own bodies, the drudgery of house work, low wages; and, not least women's exclusion from politics". The principal statement of feminism was: " women must be allowed to set their goals and control their lives" (LeGates, 2001, P.197-200).

First wave feminists were mainly white middle-class women. Women who worked in factories, or as servants and farmers were not represented in the feminist movement. The movement primary focus was women suffrage, in addition to education, employment, property and marital rights.

Meanwhile, a second wave of feminism was born after World War II. It was called second wave feminism in order to highlight the "continuity with earlier feminist activities and ideas" Dann (as sited in Coleman, 2009, P.4). Nevertheless,

second wave feminism did not focus on education, employment or political rights, instead it struggled against what they referred to as hidden inequalities, It called for women sexual liberation, advocated their right to use contraceptives and go through abortion, which according to them would free women from the burden of having children that they don't desire and thus empower them economically and socially .

Yet, the most controversial sanction of second wave feminism is radical feminists who promoted lesbianism as the best way for women emancipation and independence.

Third Wave Feminism ,which is also known as Post-feminism, emerged in the 1980s. It is described as " The advancement of a female discourse in a world where the equality of women is something that can be assumed rather than fought for" (Tandon, P.9). Third Wave Feminism was a result of The United Nations (UN) involvement in women's issues by holding several international conferences starting with the "International Women's Year" in Mexico City in 1975 that witnessed the announcement of the United Nation's Decade for Women (1975-1985). This trend of international feminism was an opportunity for feminists from all around the globe to meet and discuss women's rights and concerns, however; a division in the ranks has surfaced between First World Feminists and Third World Feminists who debated the relationship between gender, ethnicity, and cultural differences…

These divisions has contributed to the realizing that feminism is not a monolithic approach. Consequently; a diversity of feminisms must surface in order to represent women from different ethnic, religious, cultural, and geographical backgrounds as it was mentioned in the Begin Platform for Action 1995:

"The objective of the Platform for Action, which is in full conformity with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international law, is

the empowerment of all women. The full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women is essential for the empowerment of women. While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms. . . . (Platform for Action, Ch. II, paragraph 9)

Begin conference main concern was Gender Equality and Women Empowerment, it suggested Gender Mainstreaming as the perfect strategy for achieving these goals:

"Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality." (Extract from Report of The Economic and Social Council for 1997, (A/52/3, 18 September 1997), P.2)

It is very important to emphasise that Gender Mainstreaming " incorporates both equity and equality" (Tandon,2008, P.10).

In conclusion we must note that "waves of feminism should not be viewed as equivalent with the history of feminism but that waves "are simply those historical eras when feminism had a mass base" (Man and Huffman, 2005)[12]

[12] See: Coleman,2009

Definition of Feminism

Feminism in the general context represents " political activism by women of behalf of other women" (Mccann and Kim,2003, P.1). However, Kirst- Ashman and Hull defined feminism as the "philosophy of legal, social, educational and economic equality between women and men, that involves both attitudes and actions, that infiltrates virtually all aspects of life, that often necessitates providing education and advocacy on behalf of women, and that appreciates the existence of individual differences and personal accomplishments regardless of gender" (Kirst- Ashman and Hull, 2009, P.448).

On the other hand, Neeru Tandon(2008), claims that defining feminism can be tricky saying that " Precisely defining feminism can be challenging, but pragmatically, a broad understanding of feminism includes women acting, speaking and writing on women's issues and rights, identifying social injustice in the status quo and bringing their own unique perspective to bear on issues" (P.2).

Bell Hook(2000) offered a concise definition of feminism saying that feminism is " a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression" (P.1). Through this definition he tried to emphasise that feminism does not only concern women but men as well.

Then, we can conclude that there is not a clear, specific, or correct definition that can describe feminism whether as a political or as a social movement. According to Patrocinio P. Schweickart if we surveyed the opinions of feminists regarding the definition of feminism they would answer as following:

1- Feminism is dedicated to the achievement of equality between women and men.

2- Feminism is dedicated to the liberation of women.

3- Feminism is dedicated to the abolition of patriarchy.

4- Feminism is dedicated to the abolition of sexism.

5- Feminism is dedicated to the authentic realization of the self-consciousness of women. (Gardiner, 1995, P.235)

Since feminism seized to be a monolithic approach, a monolithic definition for it does not exist. Which makes Schweickart statement in this regard so accurate: " Feminism is an unfinished business; a text in progress. For this, any definition must be deficient in meaning so as to remain open to meaning that is yet to be produced" (Gardiner, 1995, P. 236)

An Overview of Feminist Theories:

1- Liberal Feminism:

"Liberal feminist theory is a traditional theory which has evolved from liberalism and seeks to copy the liberal principles of justice, liberty and equality to women, without questioning male power" (Tandon, 2008, P.41)

2- Radical Feminism:

" Radical feminist theory is chiefly concerned with the issues arising out of pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape and women battering. In order to be liberated from sexual oppression, radical feminists prescribe a strategy to create an exclusively female sexuality through celibacy, auto eroticism, or lesbianism. They are against heterosexuality and traditional roles of women as faithful housewives and child-bearing machines" (Tandon,2008,P.44)

3- Marxist (Socialist) Feminism:

" This type of feminism improves intellectual understanding of relations between class and sex. This theory advocate the economic empowerment of women and regards the class system of capitalism as the only one cause of women's oppression" (Tandon, 2008,P.46)

II.II Feminism in the Arab Region

First Wave: Feminism and Nationalism; Islamic or Secular[13]

Some might be surprised that the first documented Pro-feminist writings in the Arab world belong to Muslim clergies, in 1869 and 1873 Shaikh Ahmad Rifa'i al-Tahtawi and Ali Basha Mubarak published several books to promote girls education in Egypt. Then followed by Sheikh Muhammad Abduh "a renowned Azhar scholar" who encouraged Muslims to go back directly to the source of their religion Qur'an and Sunnah "for guidance in the conduct of everyday life". In dealing with gender issues Abduh " confronted the problem of patriarchal excesses committed in the name of Islam. He especially decried male abuse of the institutions of divorce and polygamy". In 1892 Hind Nawfal established 'al- Fatah' Journal which was the first magazine that targeted women and discussed their issues. Later on, a Coptic lawyer called Murqus Fahmi wrote a book called "al- Mar'a fi al-Sharq" (The woman in the East) "criticizing patriarchal tyranny over women in the home, which he claimed no religion sanctioned" (Badran, 2009, P.20-21).

However, the Pro-feminist writer that provoked great controversy was Qasim Amin with his books Tahrir al- Mar'a (Woman Liberation) and al-Mar'a al-Jadida

[13] See Badran(2009), Weber(2001), and Kandiyoti(1996).

(The New Woman), in which he has attacked " the practice of female seclusion and the Hijab- by which he meant face veiling, as the term Hijab signified at that stage, rather than the modest covering of the head and body, which he did not oppose" (Badran, 2009, 21)

Qasim Amin argued that the deterioration of the Egyptian woman at that time was because of depriving her from rights that were inherently hers in Islam. As a Muslim modernist and reformist he preached the importance of female education and empowerment, claiming it to be the best strategy to better women conditions.

Another known feminist writer at the time was Malak Hifni Nasif who was famous as Bahithat al-Badiya (Searcher in the Desert). She began publishing essays in al-Jarida newspaper that was issued by al-Umma Party, which collected her essays in a book called Nisa'iyyat in 1910. Moreover, Nabawiyya Musa is another remarkable feminist writer who has advocated women issues through her writings in that era with a book of collective essays titled al-Mar'a wa al-'amal (Woman and Work) that was published in 1920.

Nonetheless, organized feminism in the Arab region came into life in 1923 when Huda Sha'arawi organized the Egyptian feminist union (EFU) whose objective was to raise the intellectual and moral level of the Egyptian woman so as to enable her to realize her political and social equality with men form the legal as well as from the moral point of view. (Blaydes and Tarouty,2009, P.366)

This wave of feminism was associated with movements of modernization and postcolonial state establishment. As a result " Nationalism was the leading idiom through which issues pertaining to women's position in society were articulated" (Kandiyoti,1996, P.8).

Members of the feminist movement during that period of time were educated women who belonged to elite classes of society, they called for educating girls, social justice, and adopted a liberal feminist discourse.

Despite the great accomplishment of first wave feminists in the Arab world concerning political and social development, particularly in higher education. However; they failed to gain popularity and support among the masses and were constantly attacked by their conservative society. This can be attributed to the fact that they could not elaborate their own autonomous discourse that reflects their cultural authenticity and independence. Furthermore; their feminist and political discourses were contradictive, while they combated western colonization and demanded independence as members of the nationalist movement, they adopted western prototypes for women's liberation in terms of dress and behavior, in addition to using the French language to communicate their thoughts and ideas through the union's magazine (l'Egyptienne) that was founded in 1925.

The (EFU) remained an exclusive forum for elite women, they tried to approach the general public by establishing another newspaper in Arabic called al-Misriyaa (The Egyptian Women) in 1937. Yet, despite the efforts of the (EFU) leadership to approach a wider audience, the union's membership and general profile remained exclusive for the upper class.

Likewise, the secular orientation of the (EFU) caused a division between its forces and led one of its members Zaynab Al-Ghazali to form the Muslim Women's Society (MWS) in 1936 with a primary focus on welfare work; the society later expanded its scope to include training of women in the art of preaching and the instruction of other women on religious matters. Zaynab Al-Ghazali commented on the matter by saying: " The Egyptian Feminist Union wanted to establish the

civilization of the Western woman in Egypt and the rest of the Arab and Islamic worlds" (Badran,2009, P.27).

In order to be objective, we have to say that the (EFU) never attacked Islam or Islamic traditions, they repeatedly said that the values and principles they advocated were compatible with the spirit of Islam. However; according to (Badran,2009) the (MWS) favoured an Islamic state with a theocratic leader, while the (EFU) aspired for a secular state that derives its legitimacy from Islamic principles.

It is very important to note that the (MWS) and the (EFU) joined forces more than once to advocate for nationalist issues such as ending the British Military presence in Egypt and calling for independence. But, they rarely joined forces to advocate women's issues. The (MWS) called for absolute equality between men and women in the Public Space which according to them was compatible with Islam, yet; it promoted a complementarity relationship between man and woman in the private sphere. The (EFU) demanded greater access for women in public life, while the (MWS) focused on women's family duties and marital obligations.

Despite the fact that the (MWS) agenda was in line with the Muslim Brothers fundamentalist discourse regarding women, and the growing popularity of the party that was established in 1928 by Hasan al-Bana; the (MWS) leader Zaynab al-Ghazali repeatedly turned down al-Bana's invitations to include her society under the umbrella of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nonetheless, when the Islamist movement was dissolved by the state in 1948, al-Ghazali instantly joined the Brothers forces and changed the name of her organization to be "The Muslim Sisters", thus; the society's primary focus shifted from women's issues toward the establishment of an Islamic state. The emergence of the (MWS) into the lines of the Muslim Brothers put an end to Islamic Feminism as an autonomous movement in the Arab region and silenced

Islamic feminist calls for a very long time until they started to surface again in the late 1980's.

Second Wave: Feminism, Marxism and Arabism[14]

The monolithic discourse of liberal feminism represented by the (EFU) and the Arab Feminist Union (AFU) , that was formed in 1944 and included feminist from different Arab countries who gathered to discuss the situation in Palestine, instigated a new feminist discourse that employs Marxism and Socialism as its idioms.

Inji Aflatun and Latifa Zayyat were members of a new feminist organization that was found in 1945 under the name of (The League of University and Institutes' Young Women) to be dissolved a year later. The league members joined the mainstream communist movement and formed (The Provisional National Feminist Association), they linked class and gender oppression to imperialism, thus; "there was no room to discuss women's liberation which was subordinated to the struggle against imperialism" (Badran, 2009, P.30).

However, all kinds of feminist voices were suppressed after the first Egyptian Revolution in 1952. The ones that were handled most urgently were communist and liberal feminists. After granting women suffrage rights in 1956, The (EFU) was dissolved and replaced with " Huda Sharawi Association" that offered a range of social services and welfare aid.

The state started banning feminist activities and taking legal actions against members of feminist association, in 1956 a group of women from different backgrounds formed (The National Feminist Union), however; the state did not issue

[14] See Badran (2009), Keddie(2007), Kandiyoti (1996), Atiyat(2004)

an official permit for it which led to closing it in 1959 and sentencing Inji Aflatoun the Marxist activist to jail.

Five years in 1964 later the Muslim Sisters association faced the same fate, when it was dismantled and its leader Zaynab al-Ghazali was sent to jail. In response, the state issued a law that banned the formation of women's political organization after that.

For other Arab countries such as Jordan and Syria things were almost the same. In 1954 the Arab Women Federation was established in Jordan, to be dissolved three years later in 1957 with other political parties (See Keddie (2007) and al-Atiyat(2004)). The country did not see any organized form of feminist activity until 1975 when Women's Federation in Jordan (WFJ) was licensed by the Government, the federation had a set of progressive goals and operated numerous women services, however; in 1981 a state-sponsored General Federation of Jordanian Women was established; "the government effectively took most powers away from the independent (WFJ) and thenceforth dominated most activities regarding women" (Keddie, 2007, P.135).

At that time Syrian women were active in the Nationalist Women's Union and in communist women's group in the 1940s and 1950s. However, after a military cope in 1963 the Ba'th[15] party came to government and the existing women organization and the Women's union were integrated in the party structure in 1968 as the General Women's Union (GWU). The (GWU) sponsors women welfare activities and incorporation in Public life. Yet, It is very difficult for nongovernmental women groups to operate independently from the (GWU). (See Keddie, 2007, P.137-38)

[15] A socialist, secular, and nationalist party, which rules Syria since 1963. (See Keddie, 2007)

The Arab states only allowed feminist voices that were in line with its policy concerning pan-Arab unity. They promoted women's education and labor rights as part of their economic and social reformist strategy. Notwithstanding, autonomous feminist voices who promoted different versions of social and political change were shushed whether they were Islamic or Secular.

Third Wave: State Feminism and neo-liberalism[16]

Since the early 1980's until now, feminism adopted a new direction in the Arab region. After the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by a number of Arab countries[17], they became officially committed to the international feminist project "with its emphasis on removing 'obstacles' to gender equality through changes in legislation, improving access to education and paid employment and combating sexist attitudes" (Kandiyoti, 1996, P.13).

Thus, mainstream feminism in the Arab Middle East has adapted to a new form of state patronage, they operate within the framework assigned to them by the state which is consistent with the international agenda for women and global post-feminist strategies.

Most Arab states often favor reform from above (See Keddie,2007,P.134). With significant changes and amendments to civil status law and labor law in various Arab countries that were in favor of women. Yet, "the increasing state conservatism in

[16] See: Badran (2009), Keddie (2007),and Kandiyoti(1996)
[17] Arab countries which ratified CEDAW Convention: Jordan(1992), Algeria(1996), Comoros(1994), Iraq(1986), Kuwait(1994), Morocco(1993), Tunisia(1985), Lebanon(1997), Libya(1998), Egypt(1981), Yemen(1984), Saudi Arabia(2000), Mauritania(2001), Bahrain(2002), Syria(2003), Oman(2006), Qatar(2009),Djibouti(1998). No Arab country fully embraced the Convention other than the (Comoros and Djibouti), each country had several reservations on different paragraphs, however; the reason for making these reservation was unanimous: Incompatibility with Islam.

some countries forced women organizations and feminist leaders to assume a more independent stance than they might have had in previous decades. Indeed one observer has noted the shift from state feminism to civil society feminism" (Moghadam, 2003, P.280).

Anyhow, third wave feminism in the Arab region is similar in characteristic to first wave feminism. It adopts a liberal discourse, that advocates women issues while being compatible with Islam. But, feminist activities remain exclusive to the elite and upper classes of society that follow western trends in terms of clothing and general conduct, which is causing a gap between them and the general public and prevents them from implementing their programs and agendas effectively.

Additionally, the present feminist discourse is not diverse, as Islamic and radical feminists are marginalized, neutralized, and absent from the scene, which made third wave feminism in the Arab Middle East somehow redundant.

Further, the feminist scene in Arab countries is rich in practice and poor in theory. The lack of a culturally authentic theory that represents the actual conditions, problems, and vision of the Arab woman and her society, left us with feminist activists that advocate women issues without a specific ideological background that serves as their point of reference, which made Arab feminism an easy prey for its critics, who frequently highlight its reliance on Western theories and frameworks, and link it with postcolonial strategies and discourses.

Women's movements in the Arab world confront conservative tribal and Islamist powers (See Keddie,2007). But they do not have the upper hand in this confrontation, as Islamic discourses are popular at grass root levels while tribal structure has been deep rooted in Arab and Islamic societies for centuries. In order to

gain support among the masses feminists need to utilize cultural constituents of their own culture, history, and civilization to form part of their discourse.

In order to revive feminism in the Arab region as an influential political and social movement we need to open up a free space for ideological debates. If we gathered up as feminists from different backgrounds and offered our vision and scholarship regarding women's issues, we might come up with a cohesive feminist theory that generates from our own reality and culture, which would be neither monolithic nor redundant.

Chapter III

Feminism and Islam

III.I. Feminism, Islam and Orientalism

One might wonder when he/she sees the title of this section how can these three terminologies: orientalism, feminism and Islam overlap. The answer is actually simple, since Islam and the Muslim woman are considered to be focal points in orientalist literature, and local feminism in our region has been affected, one way or another, by western feminisms that were influenced as well by orientalism and imperialism in terms of shaping their consciousness regarding the Muslim woman. Thus, an elaborated discussion of these concepts is a crucial element of our debate concerning the representation of women rights in Islam and Muslim societies.

Before we engage in any further discussion of the topic, we must define orientalism and identify the elements that constitute the relationship between orientalism and feminism in the Middle East in general and the Arab world in particular.

Orientalism according to Edward Said (1979) is: " The enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage -and even produce- the orient politically, socially, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the enlightenment period" (P.3)

While Ashcroft and Ahluwalia said that orientalism is "The various disciplines, institutions, processes of investigation and styles of though by which the Europeans came to (know) the (Orient) over several centuries, and which reached their height during the rise and consolidation of nineteenth- century imperialism" (P.47)

In his famous work Orientalism (1979) Edward Said pointed out the power of knowledge that the European man used to construct the Orient, while emphasizing on

the Orient's inferiority in comparison to the superior West. Which in return produced the ideology of (Us vs. Them), us the developed, culturally and morally superior West and them the deteriorated barbaric East.

Said argued that the West has feminized the East by attributing to it the same traits and characteristics that are usually associated with women such as irrationality and exoticism. In his work he criticized western orientalists and scholars who presented a false image of Islam as being rigid, unchanging, and monolithic.

Despite the fact that Edward Said major work Orientalism (1979) did not address the issue of gender in the Middle East directly, and cannot be described as a gendered scholarship, however, Leila Abu Lughoud (2001) argued that Said's work provoked a new body of scholarship that concentrated on the Muslim woman's image in Orientalist discourse and western academic production. She added that his scholarship inspired other academics and researchers to reexamine and reinvestigate the body of feminist scholarship in the Middle East using Said's theory that " one cannot divorce political engagement from scholarship" (P.101), which provided a new reading for it depending on the central issue "Orientalism" and East/West politics.

Orientalists have always tried to establish the East as the other, and according to Said emphasized the superiority of some men over some other men. Meanwhile, feminist orientalism a term used by Charlotte Weber (2001) identified the Muslim woman as the other and tried to show her otherness by accentuating everything that makes her different " honor killings, female circumcision, cousin marriage, the Harem, and the renewed obsession with the veil" (Sabbagh, 1996, P.XI).

The problem here is not western scholars growing fascination in Middle Eastern studies including feminism, but it lies in the fact that Western women are the ones articulating Muslim women oppressions and the answers to these oppressions.

The hotspots of western feminists scholarships on the Middle East are the same issues that underline the Muslim woman "otherness" such as violence, honor crimes, etc..

Further to that local feminist societies dependence on western funding and adopting "post-feminist" strategies as their mobilizing idiom made (western hotspots) of Arab and Muslim women oppression also hotspots of Arab and Muslim academic scholarship and social programs.

The hegemonic relationship between western and eastern feminisms actually has historical roots that go back to the begging's of the feminist movement. In 1904 a group of American and European women established the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA), in an attempt to expand the Alliance's membership to include women from other parts of the world outside Europe and The United States, two of its leaders (Carrie Chapman Catt and Aletta Jacobs) organized a world tour in 1911 to recruit new memberships. During the tour they visited Palestine, Syria, and Egypt and wrote reports about women conditions in these countries that were published in the alliance journal ***Jus Suffragii***. Between 1912 and 1950 the journal published twenty seven articles that discussed women conditions in the Arab world, only few of those were written by Arab women whether Muslims or Christians. The pieces submitted by western feminists were mainly concerned with veiling and considered its abolition the first step towards Muslim women liberation. However, Arab women made no reference to veiling through their articles but were demanding more economic and political opportunities. (See Weber, 2001)

The past orientalist feminist discourse that highlighted the Muslim woman moral, social, and political seclusion in comparison to her liberated western counterpart was mobilized to serve the colonial objective of Imperialism and justify the presence of European colony's in different parts of the East to civilize the men and

liberate the women[18]. Muslim women were always approached as an object of feminist advocacy for western activists. Thus, it was western women duty to educate and liberate their Muslim sisters and free them from their misogynist society and religion.

Western scholars who concentrated on what made Muslim women different such as the veil, the Harem, and polygyny failed to recognize certain aspects of empowerment that Muslim women enjoyed a while before their Western counterparts such as property rights, the right to sign contracts, and own a trade according to Islamic teachings. Hence, western women strived so long to gain and did not succeed before the nineteenth century: "women did not gain the right to their own property until 1870 in Britain, 1900 in Germany, and 1907 in France" (Duiker and Spielvogel, 2008, P.433).

Western feminists who toured the East in the past came in an attempt to globalize their feminist calling and to raise oriental women consciousness about their political and social rights. they saw that they were one step ahead of other women who lived outside Europe and the United States, their main focus was (Women Suffrage) consequently they measured women empowerment in other societies in relation to their visibility in the public space (See Weber, 2001).

When western women came to the Middle East and visited the Arab world (precisely Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Palestine) to stand on women conditions in 1900 (after four centuries of colonialism in these countries), they only saw how miserable and unfortunate women conditions were, but fell short to recognize that the conditions of women were nothing rather than a reflection of the conditions of men. Arab men were suppressed, deprived from proper education, and maltreated by

[18] See: Weber (2001), Abu Lughoud (2002), Sabbagh (1996), and Gruel (2009).

colonial authorities. Yet, these feminists never referred to their states contribution to Muslim women misery by denying Muslim men and women alike the right to be full citizens in their own countries. Instead they invited western men whether as politicians and militants or as priests and rabbis to come to these parts to educate and civilize Muslim men and teach them proper manners which would grant Muslim women more freedoms consequently.

Orientalism primary constituent is the superiority of one culture against other cultures which justifies its members intellectual and cultural hegemony over members of inferior cultures. It gives people of superior cultures the right to articulate the needs and rights of others without referring to them. These dynamics that governed the relationship between Western and Eastern men were the same dynamics that instituted the relationship between First World and Third World feminism during the past century and until our present day.

III.II Feminism and Islamophobia[19]

The wave of (Islamophobia) that surfaced in the west in the 1990s and reached its peak after the terrorist attacks of 9/11[20] in 2001, produced a body of feminist scholarship that pointed out female oppression in Middle Eastern countries, especially Islamic ones. In these scholarships Islam was linked to violence, the

[19] "Islamophobia is an ideology, one that provides meanings about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting in similar ways to that which it has historically although not necessarily as a continuum except in its nature as Ideological. That is, that Islam and Muslims are conceived through various systems: thought, belief and symbols, all of which pertain, influence or impact upon social action, interaction, responses and so on, shaping and determining understanding, meaning and attitudes in the social consensus: the shared languages and conceptual maps." (Allen, 2010, P.188)

[20] Terrorist attacks that targeted the two buildings of (The World Trade Center) in 2001. (See Duiker and Spielovogel, 2008) .

Muslim woman to oppression, and lack of agency, consequently, Islam and Islamic practices were viewed as an obstacle in the way of women's progress:

Khalidi and Tucker (1996)[21]: "For many Westerners the issue of Arab women's rights and the broader problematic of gender and power in the region can be really summed up in one word "Islam". The image of Islam as the fount of unmitigated oppression of women as the foundation of a gender system that categorically denies women equal rights and subjugates them to men, recurs in movies, magazines and books of our popular culture as well as in much academic discourse" (P. 9)

Again Muslim women otherness was illuminated in this discourse, with greater emphasis on the veil among other issues as clear evidence of the violence, subjugation, and brutality practiced against them by Muslim men and Islamic teachings:

" Muslim everywhere behave with equal savagery. They behead criminals, stone to death female – **only female**- adulteresses, throw acid in the faces of **women** who refuse to wear the chador[22], mutilate the genitals of **young girls** and ritually abuse animals… they are backward and evil, and if it is being racist to say so then I must be and happy and proud to be so"[23] (Kilory-Silk, The Daily Express, 15 Jan 1995)

The quotation above is a sample of the Islamophobic discourse that spreads in the West (Europe and the United States) which presents female Muslims as victims of their religion, while giving inaccurate accounts about Muslims and Islam. This inaccuracy actually stems from the disability of the West and some of its scholars,

1 See Sabbagh (1996)

[22] A large cloth worn as a combination head covering, veil, and shawl usually by Muslim women especially in Iran. (Marian Webster Online Dictionary)

[23] See Afshar (2008)

politicians, and general public to differentiate between what is Islamic and what is traditional, a problem that Muslims themselves suffer from as well.

This discourse has revived a long debate in Islamic and non-Islamic societies about the veil. Veiled women (who wear a clear sign of Islam) became the target of several campaigns from within and without to liberate them by unveiling them.

Again Western forces started to employ "Liberal Feminist Rhetoric" to justify the war against terror which became almost synonymous to Islam when president Bush listed that "the oppression of women is everywhere and always wrong" as a central reason to attack Iraq. (See Gruel, 2009)

On the other hand, Western feminists started referring again to Muslim women as absent agents who are not aware of the kind of oppression that is (forced) upon them in the name of their religion. However, the tools now were different while in the past orientalist feminists asked Christian and Jewish missionaries to come to the Middle East and spread their teachings by opening missionary schools that would educate the barbaric Arabs and Muslims (see Weber, 2001), nowadays the majority of feminist scholars are calling for the establishments of secular societies as: " Salvation no longer touted as present in Christianity, but in science and progress" (Murata, 1992, P.4).

This discourse generated two reactions among Muslim scholars the first a passionate Islamic literature that started defending Islam and Islamic teachings especially the veil while idealizing the status of women in the Middle East without making any reference to women oppression that have been exaggerated by the West but in some cases has some reality to it. The other is embodied in the various attempts made by Muslim and Arab feminists who started claiming that the veil is not an Islamic practice nor an obligations such as Fatima Mernissi and Nawal El Sadaawi by

articulating almost the same opinion which claims that the oppression Muslim women experience because of the veil is the same kind of oppression that Western women face because of over exposure saying that in both cases women are treated as bodies without a mind (See Moghissi, 1999 and Mernissi, 1987). A comparison I cannot agree with because of the cultural specificity of each society (the Muslim society and the Western society) that have been through various historical and societal experiences which shaped them in different ways. In addition to the fact that I do not necessarily see the veil neither as a mean of oppression nor as a mean of social or political exclusion.

Other Muslim feminists such as Fawzia Afzal-Khan(2005) said that Muslim women who veil either are coerced or are simply victims of choice, comparing veiling to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories:

" As we see here, controlling women's bodies – conceived as the territory or possession of men – is a form of violence similar to that enacted against the inhabitant of occupied territories. In both cases such violence is naturalized through discourse – religious in the case of the former and nationalist/ Zionist in the case of the latter. What is elided in both cases is that such ideological ruses (even when they are adopted by victims claiming "freedom of choice", as in the case of Muslim women who insist their covering of themselves is a "happy choice") ultimately paper over the real issue of oppression of the many by the few". (P.25)

Meanwhile, Haideh Moghissi (1999) said that Muslim women are coerced to wear the veil through religious discourses that highlight the contentment and happiness of the veiled woman in life and the hereafter whilst mentioning the consequences of not being veiled which is hell fire in public sermons and religious lessons held at home. She also claimed that women who are convinced of wearing the

veil are a minority whereas the majority of women who cover do so in order to find a good husband, avoid societal pressure, or find a job, giving (The Islamic Hospital) in Jordan as an example for a work place that hires only veiled women.

Of course such opinions are more than welcomed by the West where these feminists are celebrated and widely quoted among scholars who utilize their arguments as authentic accounts of Muslim women who are emancipated and can recognize their own oppression. However, their arguments sometimes seem as an echo of orientalist feminists who see the veil as a primary symptom of Muslim women oppression.

Yet, the question remains are these feminists providing multidimensional arguments that depend on various accounts rather than their own, or do they represent a partial understanding of a certain phenomenon. I can answer this question by referring to a field study conducted by Sharifa Zuhur (1992) that offered three examples of the Egyptian woman: The first was for a twenty-three years old university student, noting that she is one of the best in her department and works in her family shop in the afternoon, who wears the Islamic dress including a face veil (niqab) and gloves and dreams of an Islamic society where all women wear the veil. The second is for a career woman in her fifties who expressed great dismay and opposition toward women who wear the veil describing it as a sign of women degradation. Meanwhile, the third example is for a twenty-seven years old woman who does not don the Islamic dress herself but defends the historical arguments of Islamists for a modest dress code while criticizing the lax of moral values in the west.

Through these examples we can answer the question by saying that these feminists have associated self-agency and independence only with the second example that refuses the veil. Someone might say but they did not attack the sanction

of women represented by the third example?! I have to disagree. In the third example we see the potential for women who were called by Afzal Khan "victims of choice" ,who did not oppose the veil (in spite of not wearing it themselves) but defended the historical and religious arguments for wearing it, which means that they might actually adopt the Islamic dress code in the future saying that it is "a happy choice".

Personally, I am not against women who do not adhere the Islamic dress code out of personal convictions or who are just not ready to take this step yet, neither do I welcome radical Islamist opinions who call for utilizing the legislative power to enforce the practice by taking legal actions against women who do not cover. But what I find disturbing here is the portrayal of the veil as an antonym for agency, independence, and most importantly feminism.

When Chandra Mohanty explained what she meant by western feminists in her famous article (Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses) saying that: " My reference to "Western feminism" is by no means intended to imply that it is a monolith. Rather, I am attempting to draw attention to similar effects of various textual strategy used by writers which codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western. It is in this sense that I use the term Western Feminist. Similar arguments can be made in term of middle-class urban African or Asian scholars producing scholarship on or about their rural or working-class sisters which assumes their own middle-class culture to be the norm, and codifies working-class histories and cultures as Other" (See Mohanty and others, P.52, 1991)

When feminists (local or Western) codify their culture as the norm and other cultures as the Other, they disfranchise other women accounts, theories, and points of view, thus they closing the door of possibility in the face of a diversity of feminisms

that allows various forms of women advocacy which signals each woman cultural, religious and historical authenticity.

I believe that the core of this problem lies in our understanding of the term feminism. When (Mccann and Kim, 2003) defined feminism as " political activism by women on behalf of other women" (P.1), they pointed up a hierarchy that is not publicly announced but subtly practiced in women activism which is: some women superior standings that allow them to diagnose and detect "Other" women oppression and articulate the means by which this oppression can be eradicated. This implicit expression of superiority emulates the same Male-Female sexual hierarchy that feminism strives against within the feminist dialogue as a cultural one which is translated into a dismissive attitude that deems any definition of feminism, women advocacy, or women liberation rather than their own unviable.

The question that this chapter wanted to answer was why feminism Today is utilized to justify neo-colonialism and Islamophobia? An answer was provided by Weber (2001) when the same question was asked concerning orientalist feminists saying that " they stopped short of recognizing feminist potential within Islam" (P. 151). I would like to generalize the statement to answer my question by saying that a significant number of Western and Eastern feminists, in addition to various members of mainstream Islamist movements whether men or women cannot recognize the feminist potential within Islam as well, which causes a misunderstanding and a misrepresentation of women role, function, and rights in Islamic societies.

III.III. Feminism, Islam, and Breaking the Stereotype

I have previously discussed the general stereotype of the Muslim woman and Islam that is being circulated in Western media and academic scholarship alike. However, I did not go through the effects that such a process of stereotyping had on local feminist scholarship and activism in the Middle East.

Unfortunately after long ages of colonialism during which the European white man has successfully implanted a general notion among the masses that recognizes and establishes his cultural and intellectual superiority over other civilizations and cultures. It was hard for third world feminists in general, and Muslim feminists in particular to shake off the feeling of inferiority and disability before their Western sisters.

Western feminists continuously noted the fact that being non-Western means being uncivilized (See Weber,2001 and Mohanty and others,1991). And started a multidimensional process of stereotyping: Women empowerment means adopting Western manners in terms of clothing, habits, and culture. Thus, women liberation became a Western concept, that was created, constituted, and advocated by the West.

Eastern women including Muslims started responding to these stereotypes differently and decided to take certain actions to break them. However, they might have asserted the stereotype instead of breaking it. In 1923 after returning from the IAW's Rome Congress, Huda Sha'rawi and Saiza Nabrawi took their veils of in Cairo train station (See Badran (2009) and Weber (2001)), according to Weber this step was taken not because of Arab women obsession with the veil, but due to Western feminist obsession with it, as they continuously questioned their Arab and Muslim

counterparts about it and stressed that taking the veil off would be the first step towards their emancipation, i.e. towards their Westernization.

A more contemporary example can be found in the writings of Fatima Mernissi, according to Abu Loghoud (2001) Mernissi in her book "Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood" has reinforced the Orientalist stereotype of women in the Harem, she expresses her mother's wish of modernity " for a little girl dressed in Western clothes who will attend school, learn French, and become liberated- against all the restricting forces of tradition and the Harem. Tradition and Modernity. Harems and Freedom. Veiling and Unveiling. These are the familiar terms by which the East has long been apprehended (and devalued) and the West has constructed itself as superior" (P.108)

Again women liberation was synonymous to western culture and western values. Being Western in thoughts and actions became an important component of the feminist label, women who do not comply to these standards are disfranchised as feminists, despite the wide range of Western feminist theories, yet a non-Western feminist theory seems out of context, maybe not feminist enough, or a little bit threating.

Local feminists intentions to break the stereotype were actually true; however, their strategies and opinions that leaned remarkably toward the West, have caused a feminist backlash among Arabs and Muslims. Who started connecting feminism with colonialism, cultural racism, and most importantly secularism. Mainstream feminist movements in the Middle East never attacked Islam explicitly; nonetheless, some of

them did encourage a secular discourse, while others supported a so called "Liberal Islam[24]" that resonates with their beliefs and can be utilized politically[25].

On the other hand, the feminist backlash was taken advantage of by some Islamic fundamentalists who started attacking the concept of women rights by deeming it as foreign and non-Islamic, a discourse that was welcomed with open arms in the West as evidence of the backward and oppressive nature of Islam:

"If largely unnoticed in the West, the Muslimwoman had a life prior to 9/11 in the1970s and 1980s, the Islamists had launched their version of the Muslimwoman in Muslim Africa and Asia. By the 1990s, Muslim women were seriously challenging Islamists' fabrication of the Muslimwoman. Now, ironically, the (neo-Orientalist) West is doing the work of the Islamists in relaunching the Muslimwoman at precisely the moment when the West is intent upon containing Islamists. Could such Western embrace of the Muslimwoman be the gendered equivalent of a penchant for backing repressive (patriarchal) regimes?" (Badran, 2008)

The Muslim woman stereotype has been utilized in political and cultural discourse as a pivotal justification for Western expansionism. However, the stereotype cannot be broken with elements from the same forces that helped creating it:

" I look at the dangers that those who claim to speak on behalf of Muslim women may improperly blame the Islamic religion, ignoring the chaotic post-colonial historical and political dynamics, such as the dominance of patriarchal, monarchical, dictatorial regimes in most of the Muslim societies and communities that are in fact responsible for women's situation in these countries. Then, looking at contemporary discourses about "democratizing" the Muslim legal systems with a focus on earlier colonial and

[24] Liberal Islam represents the production of some Muslim scholars and theologians such as: Mohammad Shahror, al-Ghazali Harb, and Mahmud Taha. Whom opinions do not concord with the rest of the Ulema (the scholars of Islam) in terms of Islamic dress code, Gender segregation, and other Shari'ah verdicts.

[25] See: Barazangi (2009), Badran (2009), and Scott (2009)

missionary claims of "civilizing" Muslims, particularly women" (Barazangi, 2009, P.404).

Thus, breaking the stereotype will come by developing a cultural discourse from within and not from without. Giving the complex historical, political, and cultural legacy that Western feminism had in the region and its related politics.

Chapter IV

Islamic Feminism: A Theory in the Making

Islam and the Muslim woman have always been part of the feminist debate since its emergence in the 18th century. while western scholars and feminists utilized feminism to attack Islam and dethatch Muslim women from their religion claiming that it was patriarchal and oppressive, Islamic fundamentalists used Islam to disfranchise the Muslim woman and cripple her socially, economically, and politically.

However, after the reformist era in the Muslim world and the accessibility to education for Muslim women, they started to go back to the source of their religion and were able to recognize the inaccuracy that inhabited both the Western and Islamic fundamentalist discourses regarding Muslim women, their rights, and representation in Islamic primary sources (The Qur'an, The Hadith, and Shari'ah).

Muslim women no longer related to the Western glamorous invitation for liberation and emancipation since they were equipped now, thanks to globalization and neo-liberalism, with all kinds of statistic and facts which shows that "Western Gender Utopia" does not exist. According to the Guardian newspaper teenage conception rate in the united kingdom for 2009 was (38.8 conceptions per thousand women aged 15-17) saying that 48.8% of these conceptions led to a legal abortion[26]. In the USA unmarried childbearing reached a record in 2006 with unmarried mothers accounting for 38.5% of all births noting that "births among teenagers and unmarried mothers tend to lead to poor outcomes for their children and emphasizing that for the well-being of any child it is critically important that the mother be over 20 and ***married*** " [27], this only proves the Islamic point of view that stresses on the importance of the family and marriage to foster a healthy relationship between males and females

[26] http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/feb/22/teenage-pregnancy-rates-england-wales-map

[27] http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/06/health/06birth.html?_r=1&ref=teenagepregnancy

that on the long run and as a result of its prosperity would produce a healthy, strong, and emotionally stable future generations. It also shows how complementarity in performing gender roles i.e. father and mother roles that was emphasized over and over by Islam, would ease the financial, emotional, and social burdens that women might have when they venture into single parenthood.

It is important to highlight that this trend of female-headed households produced a new phenomenon which is the "***Feminization of Poverty***"[28] that indicated the fact that "the fastest growing type of family structure was of female-headed households and because of high rates of poverty among these households their increase was mirrored in the growing numbers of women and children who were poor" it is important to highlight however that in Jordan[29] for instance such a phenomenon does not exist, this can actually be attributed to the fact that Jordanian people are encouraged by the teachings of Islam to provide for women who are widowed or divorced , as when Muslim women started reading such literature they recognized that women emancipation and economic empowerment cannot be achieved by deviating from Islam, or the central family, and neither by promoting sexual liberation, nor singlehood. Again an answer to such a dilemma was found through Islamic teachings that forbade delivering children outside the marital institution which would force men to adhere to their financial and social obligations even if they did not feel like it.

In fact the UNESCO[30] in its study of the feminization of poverty said that it has resulted to "women and children involvement in informal economy, differential treatments of girls and boys in households, higher school dropout rates for girls, less

[28] http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/SHS/pdf/Feminization_of_Poverty.pdf
[29] arabstates.undp.org/contents/file/**Poverty**_in_**Jordan**_Arabic.ppt
[30] [30] http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/SHS/pdf/Feminization_of_Poverty.pdf

control over fertility, and recourse to prostitution", they said that male poverty was linked to unemployment and can be eradicated once a man finds himself a job, however, female poverty often exists even if a woman works full-time. This shows how the stipulation of alimony for female relatives (mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, aunts, and grandmothers) as an obligation required from men by Islam is a provision that helps preventing such cases of disadvantage that radical feminist rhetoric and liberal policies have triggered by encouraging sexual liberation and deviation from the centrality of the family.

Then we realize that the western "Gender Utopia" which was packaged and sold to first wave Middle Eastern feminists did not find as much welcoming ears as it has before when Muslim women did not possess the right tools to critically address the Western feminist discourse. Nonetheless, they also did not find satisfaction nor fulfillment in the popular fundamentalist Islamic discourse for the same reason "partial representation of Islamic teachings and history" that denied women their Islamic heritage and the empowerment they once enjoyed because of Islam and was later denied from in the name of Islam when men monopolized the religious and cultural discourses while women were alienated and marginalized.

Muslim women are now stronger, and more aware, they engage in religious scholarship and are no longer satisfied by sitting on the sidelines of history, religion, or academia, therefor; they started developing their own feminist theory, a theory that represents, highlights and answers to Muslim women struggles and challenges when they neither comply to Western ideals of the modern woman by emphasizing their Islamic identity and affiliations, nor when they refuse to adhere to fundamentalist Islamist discourses that want to cripple them and incarcerate them inside their homes,

and reproductive roles, in addition to denying them their intellectual capacity and human rights.

It is important to stress that Islamic feminism is the product of Muslim women, and their intellectual input to face the recurrent waves of orientalism and Islamophobia from without, and fundamentalist Islamic discourses from within. It is authentic, autonomous, and yet in the making as Muslim women continue to enrich it with new or renewed findings and contributions every day.

IV.I. Definition of Islamic Feminism[31]

Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm that asserts an Islamic identity. It recognizes the feminist potential within Islam by using Islamic discourse as its paramount – although not necessarily its only- discourse in arguing for women rights, gender equality, and social justice. Islamic feminism accepts modernity, however; it tries to present an alternative for modernity that is distinct from western feminism and western modernity.

In addition, Islamic feminism is the articulation and advocacy of a Qur'an mandated gender equality and social justice by saying that no verse of the Qur'an can actually have an oppressive androcentric intent, this intent comes from patriarchal interpretive traditions. Likewise, it calls for ending the employment of non-authentic traditions of the prophet or using them out of context to justify woman subordination to men, social, political, and moral seclusion of women, as well as gender-based violence.

[31] See: Badran (2009), Weber (2001), Barazangi (2009), Scott (2009), and Ruether (2007)

Moreover, Islamic feminism strives to reestablish the lost historic heritage, active agency, and cultural authenticity of Muslim women by reviving the egalitarian spirit of Islam and ending male monopoly of religious discourse and authority. It is a global phenomenon that exists in communities where Muslims are a majority or a minority, and mobilizes its advocacy in two directions: the first is within Islamic societies aiming to correct certain misconceptions that a significant number of Muslims have about gender roles in Islam, while the second targets a global audience in order to combat the falsified image presented in mainstream media, academic, and cultural discourses, regarding Islam and the Muslim woman.

IV.II. History of Islamic Feminism

The term Islamic feminism first appeared in the 1990s[32] when several Muslim feminists in Iran, Turkey, and Africa started using the term to assert their Islamic identity while advocating women rights in their societies.

Some people think that Islamic feminism first appeared in the West, that is actually in accurate (See Badran, 2009). However, it was in the West where this movement has gained momentum when Islamophobia which is a new wave of cultural racism started to utilize the Muslim woman image to legitimize its attack on Islam and Muslims:

"While large-scale conversion to Islam predominates in the west, political Islam originates in the old Muslim majority societies of Africa and Asia, although its outreach is now global. The current cultural racism and Islamophobia have

[32] See Badran (2009) and Singh and Khan (2002).

predominantly, but not exclusively surfaced in the West. Islamic feminism arose and continues to spread in both the West and in old established Muslim societies….Islamic feminism, with its calls for the implementation of gender equality and social justice, is anathema to the project of patriarchal political Islam and of cultural racism/ Islamophobia" (Badran, 2006, P.193)[33]

However, it is very important to highlight that women organized advocacy and activism within an Islamic framework started when Zeinab al-Ghazali established the MWS in the 1930s (See Chapter II).

Since Islamic feminism as a movement and a scholarship is young, its history is yet in the making. I personally believe that Islamic feminism is correlated to Islam and the rise of Islam, because Islam was the first religio-moral code that systematically advocated and implemented women rights.

IV. III Islamic Feminism and Woman's agency

After the death of Prophet Mohammad (P.B.U.H) and the four Caliphs (Abu Bakr, Omar bin el Khatab, Othman bin Afan, and Ali bin Abi Taleb), women were gradually excluded from the process of interpretation of the holly Qur'an which "has resulted in man-made laws that have been detrimental to them and their interest" (Afshar, 2008, P.422).

From that time on, women were viewed as " secondary and/or complementary in the evolved structure of Muslim communities; thus, they remain potential subjects of abuse" (Barazangi, 2009, P.406). Which has contributed to the establishment of a sexual hierarchy that subordinates and subjugates women.

[33] See: Nieuwkerk, 2006.

"Although Islam in and itself is not anti-women, and that Arab tribalism included practices such as matrilocality and matrilinearity that contrasted with the later development of patriarchal practices" (Zuhur, 1992, P.4). However, Islamic expansionism that introduced Islam to other societies and civilizations caused a gradual infiltration of some of the less egalitarian customs of these communities into Islamic techings (See Afshar, 2008).

Muslim women who once were the most empowered among their fellow counterparts, started to lose their privileges one by one. Men started monopolizing the religious discourse by establishing the fact that females are intellectually retarded in comparison to males who possess better cognitive abilities.

Women were no longer allowed to exercise their mental abilities or cognitive capacity, their physical weakness started to be used as evidence of the absence of their logic (See Amin, 2006)[34]. This has resulted in an actual lack of agency and the loss of a state of economic emancipation that Islam granted to women years and years ago due to one dimensional patriarchal interpretation of the sources of Islam: The Qur'an, The Sunnah (Prophet Muhammad Traditions), and Shari'ah[35] (the path that is guided by Qur'anic ethos).

This state of female invisibility continued for centuries, until Muslim reformers[36] such as Jamal al Din al Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Qasim Amin started advocating women rights to education according to Islamic teachings.

Yet, the long period during which women were deprived from tapping into their logical and mental abilities contributed to a state of intellectual submission to

[34] See Amara (2006)
[35] See Barazangi (2009) , P.405.
[36] See: Badran (2009) and Barazangi (2009).

men. This state of intellectual submission has deactivated half of the "Ummah[37]" and caused a regression in the developmental process of Islamic societies.

Nonetheless, women today have increasingly shown unwillingness to "submit blindly to the rule of a male caliph or a jurisconsuls" (Afshar, 2008, P. 423) when they feel that such verdicts are inconsistent with their own understanding and perception of women status in Islam and Islamic history.

Thus; Islamic feminists have been trying to authorize Muslim women as a legal entity that can articulate its own needs, and opinion regarding religious and public issues. In addition, to the incorporation of " Muslim women scholarship into mainstream sources on Islamic thoughts" (Barazangi, 2009, P.407).

Islamic feminism seeks reviving Muslim women active agency in shaping Islamic society and thought. This can be done by legitimizing women narratives of Islamic history and "critically address the use and misuse of Islam's primary sources (The Qur'an and the Hadith)" (Barazangi, 2009, P.403).

Reviving Muslim women agency would grant them political weight in their society and help them get their voices heard. Their rights, needs, and participation will no longer be secondary to that of men. Accordingly; they would regain the economic, legal and political empowerment that was originally granted to them by Islam. On the other hand, when Muslim women can detect their own oppression and try to find solutions for it, this would prevent any interference by Western feminisms in the name of liberating the Muslim woman.

[37] The single Islamic community that, according to the teachings of prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) recognizes no divisions by race, class, or nationality. The Umma is a concept that facilitates participation without imposing debilitating practical constraints. (See Afshar, 2008, P.418-19)

IV.IV Islamic Feminism and Cultural Authenticity

I have previously highlighted in the definition of (Islamic feminism) that Islamic feminists assert their Islamic identity while advocating women political, social, and legal rights in Islamic and non-Islamic societies.

The question of cultural authenticity was first addressed by Chandra Mohanty when she criticized the methodology adopted by Western feminists in terms of classifying cultural and religious practices such as the Purdah and the veil as violations of human rights and means of violence while equating them with rape, pornography and prostitution:

" By equating purdah with rape, domestic violence, and forced prostitution, Hosken asserts its "sexual control" function as primary explanation for purdah, whatever the context. Institutions of purdah are thus denied any cultural and historical specificity, and contradictions and potentially subversive aspects are totally ruled out…In both these examples, the problem is not in asserting that the practice of wearing a veil is wide spread. This assertion can be made on basis of numbers. It is a descriptive generalization. However, it is the analytical leap from the practice of veiling to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women that must be question" (Mohanty and Russo,1991, P.66)

For Muslim women certain constituents of their culture that appear as a sign of submissiveness or weakness for an outsider might represent for many of them an articulation of self-agency. This actually has caused a reversal in Middle Eastern studies in general and feminist studies in particular while in the past it was western scholars who represented the "Self" examining and investigating the "Other" (usually Middle Eastern women); however, today Muslim women regard western scholars as

the "Other" who is investigating the "Self". Something that Zuhur (1992) explicitly expressed: "A division occurs between entitled others and colonialist others who propose to examine middle eastern women. In suggesting that only the self should examine the self" (P.3)

By assigning themselves the responsibility of investigating their own conditions Muslim women are demanding the right to be different, diverse, and culturally authentic. They are not denying the fact that some Muslim women are oppressed, abused, or maltreated. But they refuse to generalize the oppression of some Muslim women to brand Islam as oppressive and Muslim women as oppressed.

Powell (2011) talked about how the media coverage of terrorist attacks in the USA after 9/11 was double standard saying that " This study of coverage of those terrorist events revealed a pattern of media coverage of terrorism in which fear of international terrorism is dominant, particularly as Muslims/Arabs/Islam working together in organized terrorist cells against a ‘‘Christian America,’’ while domestic terrorism is cast as a minor threat that occurs in isolated incidents by troubled individuals." (P.91)

This quotation might seem out of context but I will explain how I see it relevant. I personally believe that Muslim women oppression has been handled in the same mechanism by Western scholarship and mass media. While incidents of domestic abuse, and passion crimes committed by western individuals are treated as " a minor threat that occurs in isolated incidents by troubled individuals", incidents of the same nature when committed by a Muslim or an Arab are taken out of proportion to signal Muslim men brutality and Muslim women oppression. The individual act which is the exception becomes the general, the media exaggerates such news and point it out as a symptom of a much worst general condition.

In further elaboration to the point I would give Moghissi's[38] argument for why do Muslim women cover as an example. Moghissi said that many Muslim women cover in order to find a job while giving the Islamic Hospital in Jordan as an example of a work place that lists wearing the veil as a requirement for hiring female employees. Someone who is not aware of the labor market in Jordan might think that wearing the veil is crucial for Jordanian woman engagement in the labor market, which is not true, in fact the Islamic Hospital which Moghissi gave as an example of a general phenomenon (which is women wearing the head cover or the face veil to find a job), is actually the exception. In her argument Moghissi gave a partial representation of Muslim women reality when she did not mention the various institutions, organizations, and companies that explicitly or implicitly prohibit the veil and does not hire veiled women even if they obtained better qualifications, or the ones that recruit employees based on professional standards regardless of wearing or not wearing a certain costume. By this I do not intend to negate the fact that some Muslim women are coerced to wear the veil, are subjected to gender based violence, or are deprived from their legal, religious, and social rights in the name of Islam, but I demand more objectivity and credibility when we address such issues. Hence; gender based violence is an international phenomena that is not restricted to Islamic societies or Islam. On the contrary, Islam when it is well understood and implemented can prevent violence in all its shapes and forms.

Islamic feminists insisted on providing another version of Muslim women liberation that does not require them to refuse their religion all together or to give up certain aspects of it to accommodate the pubic gaze when they feel that such compromises are inconsistent with the essence of their faith (Afshar, 2008, P. 424).

[38] See Chapter III.

Accordingly they are trying to develop a feminist discourse that combats the idealization of Muslim women seclusion by Islamists who usually justify oppressive and discriminatory practices against women by Islam, and that exposes western double standards in terms of projecting, investigating, and liberating the Muslim woman.

Moreover, Islamic feminists see that " The concepts of feminism and gender equality are multi-faceted. People have differing and culturally specific conceptions of what it means to be equal. It is important to recognize the complexity of feminism and the ambiguous nature of gender equality because what women need and desire is inextricably linked to their culture, religion and economic class." (Chamas,2009, P.246)

Consequently, Muslim feminists refuse the utilization of their culture, ethnicity, and religion, as determiners of their oppression. They acknowledge the fact that they are non-Western and refuse to be disfranchised as feminists accordingly. Instead they are proud of their culture and are searching for answers that stem from their own past and cultural identity.

IV.V. Islamic Feminism: Fields of Study

The scholarship of Islamic feminism primary focuses on three aspects of Islamic culture: The Qur'an and its interpretations, The Hadith its use, misuse, authenticity, and historical context, and Islamic history.

To reread and reinterpret the Qur'an Islamic feminists have used two primary ways among others to generate their new interpretations, the first is "a contextual historical reading of the Qur'an, which involves reading a verse with regard to the

historical, social, and political context in which it was revealed in order to disclose an underlying liberal intent, there by liberating Muslim women from a literal reading" (Scott, 2009, P.60). The second is a semantic analysis[39] of the words by listing the various meanings of the words in Arabic and choosing the one that they believe is in line with Islam and its spirit using verse (38:19) in the Qur'an to legitimize their approach " Those who listen to word, and follow the best (meaning) in it: Those are the ones whom God has guided, and those are the ones endued with understanding" .

Regarding the Sunnah[40] (Prophet Muhammad reported traditions) feminists have focused on three major things: the authenticity of the tradition, the use and misuse of the traditions, and the historical context in which the tradition has been told or took place.

The third focal point of Islamic feminism is Islamic history, Muslim feminists have engaged in various historical research to revive Muslim women lost heritage, as they claim that modern presentations of Islamic history has projected a one dimensional picture of women role and contribution in Islam, whether it was in movies, school books or on TV it is the chastity, sacrifice or religiousness of the women that is emphasized rather than their significant intellectual, economic and political contribution to the foundation of Islamic society. (See Sonbol, 2003)

Islamic feminist say that there is a "widespread tendency to blame Islam for oppressing Muslims rather than blaming Muslims for misunderstanding Islam" (Barlas, 2002, P.2). By engaging in scholarship in the aforementioned fields, they hope to eradicate any misunderstanding of the sources of Islam whether among Muslims or non-Muslims.

[39] See Scott (2009) and Barlas (2002)
[40] See Barazangi (2009), Badran (2009), and Afshar (2008)

IV.VI. Islamic Feminism between Equity and Equality

The Islamic feminist discourse as the western one has been divided into two parties; the first uses the term of equity to approach gender bias and establish women rights in the social system by saying that we are equal but different, therefore; each gender should be entitled to a number of rights that is similar in essence but different in practice. The other team advocates absolute equality between the sexes and translates this belief through various attempts to rethink and reinterpret Islam. What we will explore here is the fact of being equals or different and what actually defines our rights as Muslim women.

Islam has recognized men and women as equals in humanity as well as in religious responsibilities and rights (See Chamas,2009, P.249). Therefore; both men and women should have the right to exercise their reason in the public realm; yet, one cannot deny the fact that men and women differ at the emotional, physical and biological level.

Feminists who support the equity approach to advocate women rights; say that women and men have different natures based on innate characteristics resulting in separate roles for each gender. Female and male rights are conceptualized as being different but of the same value: thus, the term equity is used indicating difference on a basis of fairness. The equality approach unlike the equity's demands complete equality of the sexes and is usually predicated upon a modern reinterpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah, as well as the Shari'a. The equality strategy rejects the notion of innate characteristics for women and men, and holds that their rights must be equal. (Foley,2004,P.59)

However, if we balanced both approaches against each other we would see that the equality approach might seem a little bit "Utopian". I personally believe that Islam has articulated women rights within a framework of "Gender Equity" where women actually were the privileged gender (unlike the general misconception that males are the privileged ones), under Islam women and men have the same rights ,whereas; men have more duties whether religious or social. If women started to advocate their rights on basis of absolute equality they would be signing off a great deal of their allocated privileges as well.

In addition, when radical feminists started advocating "Gender Equality" in the 1960's they said that the only way to achieve that would be by disabling women reproductive function whether by advising women to take birth control, legalizing abortion, or encouraging homosexuality[41]. Which makes absolute equality unrealistic, since we cannot possibly disable the reproductive function of all women in the entire world. This means that as women we need an opening for what is frequently referred to in post-feminist literature as (Positive Discrimination) which would allow women to enjoy some terms of preferential treatment such as maternity leafs, nursing hours, and daycare centers that are related to their different biological anatomy from that of men and not their mental abilities.

I think that feminist advocacy whether it was liberal or Islamic should study its targeted audience and survey the actual potential for change. We need to ask ourselves the following question " Are Muslims themselves ready to critically address the use and misuse of Islam's primary sources (the Qur'an and particularly the Hadith) in their thinking of Islam?" (Barazangi, 2009, P.403). As an answer we can say that Muslims at grass root levels are deeply influenced by the popular religious discourse

[41] See Chapter II.

regarding women and their place in society. If we took this into consideration it would be obvious that radical confrontational discourses about women in Islam would neither be smart nor politically strategic given that our audience is not ready for such arguments which would provoke a strong negative reaction.

I see that the equity approach actually helps formulating a new conception of women rights that is based on communitarianism rather than western liberal individualism; it regards both men and women as partners inside home and out and therefore are corner stones in the process of development. "By staying within this framework the women gain access to an audience who will listen because they are specking in the language of their culture" (Foley, 2004,P.70).

By this I do not mean that women should stop being active in the field of Islamic thought or Qur'anic interpretations. However, the context in which they present their arguments must be more realistic. Equality in Islam is not an abstract term, it takes what can be described as a dynamic and flexible form rather than a rigid 50/50 metric one.

IV.VII. Islamic Feminism and Global Feminism

Islam has actually regulated Muslims relationship with other civilizations and cultures, a Muslim can deal with others in two dimensions:

1- In guiding them to what he believes is true.

2- In exchanging ideas in order to achieve the best in every field of life. (Majali, 2006, P.22)

In this context we cannot shut down universal frameworks of Human rights or women rights such as CEDAW[42] convention or the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)[43] or other feminist approaches as we need to identify points of connection between Islam and other religions and civilizations, yet I am with the right to make certain reservations on specific articles present in these frameworks which do not concord with Islamic teachings and principles provided that such reservations are legitimate and justified.

Nevertheless, our main reference should remain our religion and culture; these frameworks should perform as means of support for the cause of women rights but not as generators. Hence; "Muslims, particularly women, are not exercising their own agency fully, and even when they are actively involved in seeking justice for themselves or for other women, they often use others' interpretations instead of developing their own" (Barazangi,2009, P409). Therefore Islamic feminism does neither reject nor fully embrace global frameworks of women rights, but takes from it what is compatible with the essence of Islam and Islamic societies.

Islamic societies in the past were examples of coexistence and intellectual diversity. They were open to other cultures, some Muslim caliphs had non-Muslim advisors, Christians and Jews lived among Muslims peacefully (See Afshar, 2008). Therefore, if Muslims see that certain scientific, academic, or intellectual productions of other civilizations can benefit the Islamic society and are compatible with Islam then they should adopt it.

Moreover, being a Muslim never means being isolated from the rest of the world, or being absent from the international scene. But we need to mainstream our

[42]The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. (See: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm)

[43]Adopted by world leaders in the year 2000 and set to be achieved by 2015, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide concrete, numerical benchmarks for tackling extreme poverty in its many dimensions.

culture in the global spectrum and give a culturally authentic account of ourselves and our culture that represents the majority of the masses rather than an elite minority.

Conclusion: A Feminist Critique

When Edward Said(1979) said that "one cannot divorce political engagement from scholarship" (Abu Lughoud, 2001), he articulated a theory that describes the way feminist scholarship in and about the Middle East has been progressing and evolving. However, I might add that one cannot divorce historical and cultural engagement from scholarship as well.

Through this research I have discussed various aspects of feminist activities in the Middle East, I certainly did not engage in this scholarship to declare the failure of feminist and post-feminist discourses in the region, as one cannot deny the kind of advantages that Muslim women gained, or more accurately, regained thanks to secular feminists and women movements from education to labor rights. Nor do I pretend that Islamic feminism and its discourse are the only channels available to implement or advocate women's rights. However, I intended to highlight the shortcomings and redundancy of the current feminist discourse, that rendered its progress and limited its opportunities.

As feminists we need to question ourselves and revise our goals. Have we been striving for years to gain women rights only to give the privileged few more privileges by granting them access to the apparatuses of power, while the grand majority of women are as far as it can be from claiming self-actualization? Or do we aim to create a shift in our favor in the status quo and put an end to all the illustrations of sexual hierarchy? If the present feminist discourse identifies itself with the goal mentioned in the first part of the question then what they have been doing for decades is enough as women are represented in most of the apparatuses of power, whether to contain them as a possible menace that threatens male power, or as an extension to the

privileges possessed by male family members. In addition to the most important reason of all: presenting a flirted and neat image of their countries as democratic and egalitarian.

Nonetheless, if we hope to extend the scope of political gains to include women at grass root levels, then I have to say a paradigm shift is required. Scholars have repeatedly described feminist movements in the Middle East as exclusive[44], this exclusivity in membership presented an exclusivity of political gains. Feminists discrediting Islamists as potential members of their mainstream movement in order to guarantee a "presentable" image for them and their project before the West, has cost them the possibility to project such an image in their own society.

The elite and secular model of a Westernized woman that is sponsored by women's movements does not appeal to the general public who identify her as the "Other". As an answer to Why? I will say that when Mohanty(1991) said that assertion that the practice of wearing the veil is wide spread can be made on the basis of numbers, I will duplicate her analysis to say that the assertion that the general public in Islamic societies cannot relate to a secular discourse, whether in theory or practice, can be made on basis of numbers, the number of people to whom Islamic teachings represent a pivotal aspect of their daily lives, and thus cannot separate themselves from a major constituent of their self-definition or cultural identity.

Unfortunately, Middle Eastern feminists broke away from their culture deeming it unfit for feminist advocacy, they turned to Western feminism for answers instead of searching for it on their own. They negotiated aspects of their culture and made compromises that a significant part of the public is not willing to make. Thus, they generated a discourse that derives its historic and cultural legitimacy from the

[44] See Chapter II.

experiences of other women who belong to another culture, a culture that has what we might describe as a problematic, polemic and complicated relationship with their own.

The state of intellectual subordination to the West that mobilizes feminism in the Middle East, is the reason behind the widening gulf between feminists and the general public, it is the reason why women projects in the region only have bettered under privileged women lives on the material level, yet; it failed to change aspects of the emotional, political, or social disadvantages they face when compared to men, or to feminists and activists themselves.

This is why I have chosen to present Islamic feminism as a cultural discourse that would grant feminists access to a wider audience and might actually expand their reformist potentials. In addition to trying to detect the feminist potential that Islam has, by pertaining to contemporary concepts such as gender equity, equality, and mainstreaming.

Meanwhile, also Islamic feminists need to take more progressive actions to integrate themselves in mainstream feminist activism. As their activities remain purely academic and intellectual, which puts them against a huge gap between theory and practice[45].

The case for Middle Eastern countries in terms of feminist activities is the following: the presence of a theory without practice (in the case of Islamic feminism) and the presence of a practice without a theory (in the case of mainstream feminism). What must be done in my opinion to overcome the feminist backlash that surfaced in the region is to incorporate Islamic feminist theories into mainstream feminist activity. This would grant Islamic feminist access to the field that they are absent

[45] Islamic feminism was implemented and incorporated in mainstream feminist agendas in Malaysia, which led to a series of political gains and public support for the Women movement from both men and women. See: Foley(2004)

from and would equip mainstream feminists with an ideological framework that can get them closer to the public. Since, "Islamic feminism does not cut women off from the masses, and allows them to "frame" women's right in indigenous and culturally familiar way" (Moghadam, 2003, P.186).

I see that such a feminist approach can be politically strategic, and there is no shame in taking a few steps back to reevaluate the situation in hand and to incorporate new methodologies that would benefit the general cause of women rights ever if it does not resonate my own interests and beliefs. Western feminists have done that actually, after spending two decades promoting radical feminist rhetoric with primary focus on absolute gender equality without any willingness to compromise or negotiate, they started to break away from the radical theory (few still promote it), when they saw that a rift is building up between them and the public, which required them to adopt terms that might be described as politically strategic such as gender equity and mainstreaming in an attempt to reconcile with the masses. This compromise have granted them access to a wider audience and provided them with some kind of flexibility to mobilize their reformist agendas.

This is not a debate of who is right and who is wrong; hence, such a discussion would not get us anywhere. This debate is about seeing, hearing, and authorizing other versions of "What Must Be Done" to end female oppression and establish the ultimate goal of gender equity which is the first step towards gender equality.

Feminists whether they were Islamic or Secular cannot generate change individually, they need to work and cooperate with members of their societies to implement their agendas, they need an audience that would endorse their theory and turn it into practice. This cannot be done neither by keeping the cultural nor the academic isolation that hovers in both forms of feminist activism.

As I have pointed out through the body of this research, that feminism as a Western concept cannot be studied or utilized without referring to the polemic relationship this region has with the West from colonialism, orientalism, to neo-liberalism, and the historic legacy that these intellectual, cultural, or militant institutions have had with Islam. Consequently, as Muslims we cannot afford to fully endorse concepts that have been generated from this culture without proper filtration and propping.

The intellectual drought that mainstream feminism in the Middle East suffers from is the reason behind our deterioration, it is not Islam, and certainly it is not Islamists in spite of their repetitive attempts to dismiss women rights and women empowerment through religious discourses. Mainstream feminism incorporates aspects of Western feminism in its agenda, leaving behind a culturally authentic theory that revives their cultural, political and historic empowerment under Islam and allows them to engender feminist reform "from within" instead of "from without" which leaves them at significance distance from penetrating into the source of the problem, and thereof, the solution for it as well.

Through this research I have tried to present another point of view that can be relevant and practical which is "Islamic Feminism". It is balanced, multidimensional, and can face the multiple challenges that the process of gender mainstreaming face from within (such as Islamic fundamentalism and tribalism) and from without (such as Islamophobia and cultural racism). I actually detect a potential in its theory for changing the status quo and challenging patriarchy in our Islamic society, if it was taken into practice.

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ملخص الدراسة

النظرية النسوية الاسلامية وجدل المساواة بين المرأة والرجل في الإسلام

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إشراف
الأستاذ الدكتور محمد المجالي

هذه الدراسة تهدف لإثبات أن الظلم والقهر الذي تعاني منه المرأة المسلمة ليس بسبب الدين الاسلامي، وإنما السبب وراء ذلك هي بعض التفاسير الذكورية لمصادر الشريعة الاسلامية، إضافة إلى العديد من العوامل التاريخية التي أدت لتهميش المرأة المسلمة ودورها في المجتمعات الاسلامية. لقد تم استخدام اسلوب البحث النوعي لإجراء هذا الدراسة التحليلية. وفي الختام خلصت الباحثة إلى أن هنالك امكانية نسوية كامنة في الاسلام والتعاليم الاسلامية يمكن لها أن تعود بالنفع على قضية حقوق المرأة بشكل عام من خلال انتاج خطاب نسوي جديد يقوم بتوظيف عناصر من الاسلام والنظرية النسوية الاسلامية ودمجها مع بعض الأسس التي تقوم عليها النظرية النسوية العالمية والليبرالية.